A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD: FEMINIST RECLAMATION IN NEOMEDIEVAL FANTASY

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Heroic fantasy produced by Anglophone creators overwhelmingly and often explicitly draws on western mythopoetic literary traditions. Just as products of the Renaissance and the Victorians before them, late 20th and 21st century cultural narratives romanticize and re-frame the past to serve the needs of their contemporary present. In this dissertation, I examine one conventional element of the cultural preoccupation with heroic neomedievalism: the sword. I first articulate how neomedievalism acts as a postmodern simulacrum not only of the actual historical past but also, more prominently, as an imagined and desired inheritance to one. English claims on the United States legally ended with the American Revolution, but cultural narratives of the U.S. continue to demonstrate desire for a shared legacy of British literary and cultural heroes.

I demonstrate how these continual concerns over legacy, lineage, and masculinity manifest in postmodern heroic fantasy as a double-edged sword. This is both literal and metaphorical: the subjects of neomedieval heroic fantasy conventions here are literal swords or sword-analogues; metaphorically, this sword's edges embody myriad contradictions and tensions. Through close readings of the sword as a rhetorical, symbolic, and often queer object, I explore the desire for a claim to heroism in the style

of King Arthur – aristocratic, male, able-bodied, and white – as it confronts ideological challenges associated with feminism, queerness, and racial/ethnic equality. I argue that the sword should thus be read as both an embodiment of and a challenge to traditionally phallocentric heroism.

In my explorations of neomedieval sword motifs in televisual heroic fantasy, children's and young adult fiction, and the superhero film, I show how swords rhetorically function to offer cultural critiques that engage these tensions, especially those between neomedievalism and feminism. To accomplish this, I draw on medievalism studies, narrative and cultural theories, query theory, and feminist new materialism, among other approaches. This project contributes to conversations in popular culture studies, children's and young adult literature, medieval studies, and critical whiteness studies. This dissertation includes previously published material.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Lightsaber. Chakram. Wand. Keyblade. Whatever form they take, fantasy[1] weapons are narratively and culturally significant in the hands of heroes. Many of these weapons embody the narrative functions of the neomedieval sword, regardless of whether they be a hammer, a wand, or something less explicitly phallic. In western Anglophone popular culture, the image of the sword bears forth from pre-modern—and especially Arthurian medieval—literature and culture an imbued meaning about who gets to be a hero, who is special, who is a leader. As objects representative of these traditional ideals of heroic masculinity, aristocratic nobility, and hegemonic leadership, swords have the potential to reinforce such ideals, complicate and contradict them, or even disrupt or destabilize them. When appropriated into postmodern narratives of heroic fantasy, weapons that are visibly or symbolically representative of the neomedieval sword motif may function as queer and/or rhetorical objects within the fantasy frame to create cultural meta-narratives operating alongside narrative agenda.

These rhetorical uses of weapons in recent heroic fantasy demonstrate a desire to reconcile the conflicts between fantasy's progressive and conservative implementations, serving as the focal point of ruptures surrounding time, class, race, gender, ability, and individuality. In this dissertation, I argue that neomedieval[2] swords (and their fantasy

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[1] Heroic fantasy is a crossover genre, appealing to children and adults alike regardless of its intended audience; therefore, many of the case studies in this project may be characterized as children's or young adult literature. The ubiquity of neomedieval weapon tropes across demographic reinforces rather than problematizes my argument here, and demonstrates the massive impact of heroic fantasy conventions upon our cultural memory. Heroic fantasy is a mutable genre that can include several sub-genres including but not limited to high/medieval/epic fantasy, urban/low fantasy, superheroes, and science-fiction.

[2] Neomedievalism is a postmodern simulacrum of the Middle Ages, as I will explain shortly. In brief, neomedieval refers to "medieval" but not actually medieval elements in post-medieval contexts.

weapon analogues) present opportunities for feminist reclamation. These narratives co-opt the sword from a signifier of hegemonic heroic masculinity and reframe it across genre, media, and audience into one of queer, inclusive, feminist heroism. When interpreting swords as rhetorical devices that operate as cultural meta-narratives alongside the narrative proper, we encounter both nuance and contradiction. Decoding such loaded signifiers means they often reinforce as much as they disrupt, and where such signifiers open up space for female and queer heroic characters, they often continue to uphold white supremacy.

One might wonder what connection exists between medievalism and modern western culture, and why it is prudent to examine swords as signifiers transmitted between these temporalities. At first glance, little of the Middle Ages is present in a 21st century United States, but upon reflection we find threads of neomedievalism at work, insidiously or otherwise. What, for example, do the combatants of television's *Knight Fight*, George W. Bush's "crusade" against the Islamic terrorists post 9/11, Donald Trump's "medieval" wall and wheel, and runic letters & Celtic crosses on white supremacist imagery all have in common? They are all concepts and symbols appropriated from the Middle Ages and imbued with a new meaning in their modern cultural context.

In short, they are all examples of medievalism used as cultural propaganda. The knights of *Knight Fight* bear only a superficial resemblance to their chivalric predecessors, and I don't mean the historical accuracy of their armor. When cultures transpose these medieval concepts into modern contexts, they often imbue a false "Middle Ages" within each post-modern ideological creation, which we will term

neomedievalism. *Knight Fight*, thus, is a pastiche of high medieval knighthood that centers on sword fighting while de-contextualizing it from a martial society, and even from the simulacrum of a "code of chivalry" within the feudal structure often presented via the medieval romance.

Such ideological transmutation can be subtle or overt, but in each case, it serves to exploit the nostalgic cultural understanding of the concept being appropriated for a given particular agenda. In politics, for example, President John F. Kennedy's White House was conceived as Camelot, a short-hand descriptor for the ideals of peace and justice drawn from the medieval mythic city into its post-war U.S. American context. This shifted after the president's assassination into an evocation of hope for the messianic return of the "once and future king." Demonstrating its usage in war propaganda as well as peace, President George W. Bush's rhetorical strategy in rallying the country to war against those responsible for 9/11– which of course turned out to be a pretense for invading the Middle East for their oil – relied on constructing a narrative of "us" versus "them:" the Christian West versus the Muslim East, the righteous U. S. Americans versus the terrorist Al Qaida.

President George W. Bush's rhetoric drew explicitly on the medieval crusade narrative, the warmongering imperialist lie hidden within a proselytizing religious agenda. It exploited the cultural memory and sympathies of the lay U.S. American toward any conflict pitting West against East, manipulating the public into overwhelming support for the War on Terror to "avenge" those lost on 9/11.[3] While political propaganda

[3] Holsinger, Bruce. *Neomedievalism, Neoconservativism, and the War on Terror.* Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007.

is one of the most obvious ways in which neomedievalism has invaded cultural discourse, narrative implementations are no less discursive than their more obvious political manifestations. In fact, these more subtle examples of ideological imperialism via media can be rather more insidious and manipulate audiences into modes of thinking without the critical awareness that often (but not always) accompanies audiences of political rhetoric.

As evidenced by the political examples of neomedievalism above, medieval tropes are available for deployment across the political spectrum, capable of engendering fascism just as readily as progressivism. While such usage can be commonly observed across Anglophone cultures, there is a particular investment by the United States in employing neomedievalism to construct whiteness. This explains why people of color do not have the same level engagement with the neomedieval impulse, as it is incorrectly perceived (but has nevertheless become reified in popular culture) as associated with whiteness.

This perception gets reinforced as U.S. narratives demonstrate a desire to be part of the great British tradition from which we distanced ourselves in the American Revolution, a longing for some sort of legacy and inheritance that extends back more than a few centuries. This desire for legacy motivates the incorporation of neomedievalism into U.S. culture, a sort of self-imperialism to reintegrate the country into a tradition beyond that which our short history enables us to participate. Mythic narratives outside the U.S., the Commonwealth, and Western Europe *do* involve the sword tropes and general neomedievalism to which I refer here, albeit in different ways and with distinct histories and meaning-making. During the Japanese-American

internment, swords and other cultural heirlooms that presented a perceived threat to U.S. superiority or called into question the owner's loyalty to the U.S. were surrendered or confiscated. This surrender of cultural heritage objects was symbolic of a metaphorical sacrificing of Japanese-American identity in order to be subsumed (even for survival reasons) into an exclusively U.S. one.

We can see this function of the neomedieval sword in cultural narratives as well, a liminal object that exists in both (and thus in between) disparate categories and has the power to move between them. Such use of "medieval" elements in post-medieval cultures categorizes a post-modern construct called neomedievalism, often employed to lend authority to social ideologies articulated through (mis-)constructions of "medieval" elements, including crusades, walls, knights, etc. Unlike medievalism, which bears forward in time actually medieval elements, neomedievalism is "a dream of someone else's medievalism,"[4] a concept of a Middle Ages that never was but could be *now*, manifested through imagination into political or cultural agenda.

The project of this dissertation is not to conduct a fidelity discourse around neomedievalism in the 20th and 21st century, or to evaluate the accuracy of adaptations of the medieval into the modern. Indeed, that discussion would have to include mis-understandings of the neomedievalism as actually medieval, such as when people mistakenly refer to *Game of Thrones*' treatment of female characters as acceptable because of taking place "back then" or criticizing the clothing from Disney's *Tangled* as anachronistic. The inspirations for these narratives *do* originate in pre-modernity, but

[4] Kaufman, Amy. "Medieval Unmoored," *Studies in Medievalism* 19 (2010): 4.

mediated as they are through modern fantasy narratives (and often adapted many times over prior to this iteration), they do not reflect any sort of actual medievalism and thus cannot be held to any sort of fidelity discourse.

Folklorists Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert describe a similar concept called the *folkloresque,* in which ideas, images, or stories which *seem* to be but are not actually folkloric in nature. Examples of the folkloresque appear in popular narratives like Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, J.K. Rowling's *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, and many of Neil Gaiman's works. In the folkloresque as with neomedievalism, it is productive to examine texts for not whether they differ (because of course they do, they *are different*), but instead, why and how they hold a mirror up to reflect the anxieties, desires, and ideals of the popular context in which they materialize from our cultural memory.

While the many different media, genres, and audiences the examples in this project represent demonstrate a broad variety of cultural and narrative agenda through which to employ neomedieval tropes and motifs, it must be said that the primary connotation for the neomedieval weapon motif as we see it in 20th and 21st century heroic fantasy is in fact whiteness itself. Whether overt or indirect, the white supremacist impulse insidiously works its way into the U.S. imaginary. This impulse manifests an implied universal white desire for legacy, the longing for a far-reaching generational inheritance, into narratives of self-indulgence and affirmation of entitlement and superiority. This is not to say that all neomedievalism is white supremacist, only that it has the capacity to be, and without an explicitly anti-racist approach, it defaults to reinforcement of white supremacy by virtue of complacency and cultural simplification.

The lineage most U.S. cultural narratives seek to participate in adheres to the ideal of high medieval knighthood, the knight in shining armor, the wise and just warrior. This imagining of the knight is our quintessential heroic figure, and its medieval exempla like King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table offer the inspiration behind many modern heroic figures. The U.S. imagination most readily evokes these medieval literary and cultural associations despite the broad temporal and spatial range of not only knight-like figures but also the weapons they wield. In fact, swords originate from at least 3300 BCE in the Middle East, and cultures all over the world have been using swords and sword-like weapons for as long as we have recorded history.

Swords feature heavily in mythopoetic narratives from cultures all over the world, from *Beowulf* to the *Ramayana*, and are most often the preferred weapon of the hero-protagonist. These weapons are thus *not* exclusively medieval nor western-European in origin — we might think of the Roman gladius, the Japanese katana, or the Middle Eastern scimitar just as easily as we conjure to mind an image of the high medieval knight in shining armor with a longsword strapped to his belt. Nevertheless, it is the latter representation that persists, especially within western media, in the modern popular depiction not only of swords and weapons, but also of heroes and heroism.

It is whiteness*,* writ large, that the U.S. cultural imagination embraces, reifies, and remediates over and over as a heroic ideal. This myth of whiteness, as we can term it here, readily accompanies other ideals in heroic narratives: the hegemonic hero is not only white, but male, able-bodied, aristocratic, and Christian. Despite popular understanding, these qualities do *not* define every hero in medieval (or other pre-modern) narratives. Modern interpretations most readily paint the Middle Ages — or more

commonly and incorrectly termed “the Dark Ages” — as monolithic, patriarchal, and regressive. Thus, recuperative representations of non-normative heroes in neomedieval fantasy are vital to counteracting this ideological colonization.

Thus the project of this dissertation: identifying and evaluating the cultural significance of literary neomedievalisms with respect to marginalized identities and examining their recuperative potential. Neomedievalism, pun fully intended, is a “double-edged sword,” a liminal concept that exists only in the cultural imaginary, where it relies on postmodern perceptions of medievalism mediated through ideologies that can be both harmful and healing. Using critical cultural studies approaches to 20th and 21st century heroic literature across genres and media, this dissertation examines the role of the sword (and its analogous weapons) in its rhetorical functions characterizing 21st century U.S. visions of heroism.

Throughout this project, I will show media examples of the social construction of the weapon in the neomedieval imaginary—the cultural “memory” of an imagined or alternate Middle Ages manifested in popular cultural narratives. Imbued with neomedieval aesthetics, tropes, and ideologies, I argue that the tensions between intersectional feminism and neomedieval conservatism present reclamatory opportunities for the sword as it relates to ideals of heroism, especially for women and young people. It is well-documented in cultural studies scholarship that popular heroes—both real and fictional—demonstrate the fears, desires, and ideals of the culture constructing them, and central to the hero in many instances are the symbols serving as the means by which the hero’s cultural agenda may be decoded.

By examining variable depictions of the neomedieval weapon across heroic fantasy, we can better understand the concerns and anxieties of the cultural moments producing these heroic narratives. These weapons serve as semiotic indicators of their contemporary moment's mediation of an imagined past with the present, articulating the tensions inherent in such negotiations and acting as symbols by which we can decode these contradictions. Tropes in post-Tolkienian fantasy act as a language of neomedievalism across the genres and media of heroic fantasy. These narrative functions have become codified through structuralist approaches by literary & cultural theorists like Joseph Campbell, Vladimir Propp, and Claude Levi-Strauss, to the point that such motifs are easily recognized and understood by a lay audience. When we consider the influence of such mythopoetic traditions on world building, narrative structure, and thematic elements of modern storytelling, it becomes apparent that elements of heroic fantasy demand a much more critical interpretive lens.

Heroic fantasy is a common expression of the neomedieval imaginary, often adapting pre-modern elements as world-building shortcuts, invocations of narrative authority, and most obviously, as conservative nostalgia. In employing neomedieval elements, heroic fantasy narratives engage with and make legible the modern ideologies of their contemporary moments and in doing so, offer options for hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings. Especially considering the phallocentrism of neomedievalism and its place in contemporary patriarchal constructions of masculinity and power, feminist and queer ideologies in particular conflict with the conventional social construction of the sword as masculine, violent, and authoritative. Many modern heroic fantasy narratives arbitrate these resulting tensions using metaphor via the heroic weapon

as a stand in for the hero themself, who, as previously stated, often serves as an emblem of a particular hegemonic ideal.

Because neomedievalism dominates heroic fantasy world-building, and considering fantasy's status as a crossover genre[5] with universal appeal regardless of audience demographic, it is particularly important to understand the function of the narrative weapon in negotiating modern ideals of heroism. This examination considers issues relating to gender, race, and class, and highlights the socio-historically dependent nature of such cultural narratives. Neomedieval fantasy post 2nd wave feminism addresses issues surrounding binaries of agency/determinism, individuality/collectivism, and feminism/phallocentrism. Identity politics and embodiment are also central to these discussions, and weapons participate in these negotiations not just as functional objects, but also as characters in tandem with the human heroes bearing them.

These interpretive ambiguities enable the heroic fantasy genre's potential as both rhetorically subversive and/or conservative. To decode the significance of these neomedieval weapons in modern heroic fantasy, I employ an interdisciplinary critical cultural studies framework drawing on medievalism studies, several feminist theoretical approaches, queer theory, children's and young adult literary theory, semiotics, narrative and adaptation theories, and genre theories on fantasy, myth, and super-heroism. In

[5] Crossover literature and media is that which is created or marketed for a particular age demographic but which in actuality is consumed by other/all audiences. Throughout this dissertation, I will refer to many media texts that have either been created for and marketed to children/young adults or to adult audiences but which ultimately appeal to and are consumed by both. Crossover media is particularly important because it demonstrates which narratives transgress categorizations of genre, medium, and demographic to serve universal audiences. Furthermore, as children's literature is often instructional or didactic in nature, it is important to understand which "lessons" are conveyed through narratives to impressionable youth, as these are often the most obvious ways of engaging with cultural anxieties, desires, and ideals.

engaging with the queerness of neomedievalism, I hope to show how these weapons also queer the neomedieval narratives in which they appear to present more dynamic and nuanced models of heroic in the modern cultural landscape.

In order to discuss how neomedieval motifs operate in heroic fantasy, we must first examine their presence in medieval literature, Arthurian romance in particular. Such examination makes legible the ways the cultural imaginary selectively embraces or ignores, mischaracterizes, and fundamentally manipulates our understanding of the past to influence the present. In order to do this, I take as a lens Sara Ahmed's concept of "queer use," considering how alternatives to the traditional conditions of use for certain objects can allow us to see where ideal and radical constructions of heroism occur.

The Three Principal Weapon Motifs in Medieval and Mythic Traditions

The exempla from medieval literature that developed into popular tropes as part of our cultural memory most directly come from Arthurian romance, again evoking the ideal of the knight in shining armor. While the following tropes do appear elsewhere in medieval and mythic global literatures, Arthurian romance in particular contains several narrative motifs that pertain to the discovery, acquisition, use, and repair of swords. The three I will discuss here occur most commonly in neomedieval heroic fantasy and as such are of particular interest to this dissertation project: the sword in the stone, the deicidal otherworldly weapon, and the broken & reforged sword. Of these the most notable is the "sword in the stone" motif, though popular culture has conflated the actual sword in the stone with the famous sword Excalibur (or Clarent, or Caliburn), borne by King Arthur and members of his court in various iterations throughout medieval romance.

This motif is best-known to a popular audience through Sir Thomas Malory's classic amalgamation of Arthurian literature, his epic *Morte Darthur*. It shows Arthur pulling the sword from the stone, which later validates him as the true king based on the guidance provided by the inscription in front of the sword itself. Malory describes the scene in front of the young Arthur:

> [There was] a grete stone four square, lyke unto a marbel stone; and in myddes thereof was lyke an anvylde of stele a foot on hyghe, and theryn stack a fayre swerd naked by the poynt—and letters there were wryten in gold about the swerd that saiden thus: Whoso pulleth oute this swerd of this stone and anvyld is rightwys kynge borne of all Englond.[6]

The idea that the act of pulling a sword out of stone would make someone "rightful king of all England" is something that 21st century audiences understand as axiomatic, as a fact that does not have any evidence behind it but simply must be accepted. It makes no sense, has no real-world meaning, and does not correspond to what we might traditionally value in a leader.

We can most directly connect this fictional "rule" of kingship in Arthurian literature to the *droit divin des rois*, the divine right of kings, the political doctrine by which rulers of European monarchies under Christianity authorize their entitlement to kingship through their presumed appointment by God. Medieval literary texts with either overt or implicit Christian leanings demonstrate this same concept prior to its acceptance as political/religious doctrine in the early modern period. Rather than explicitly saying that God wants Arthur to be king, medieval writers like Malory show characters' entitlement to positions of leadership by way of a trial or rite of passage that offers divine

[6] Malory, Thomas. *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Book I, Ch.5 (1485).

authorization by proxy. In other words, though God is not explicitly mentioned here, the inscription interpellates Arthur and validates his actions as kingly with implicit divine approval, as if only the "right" person will be allowed to remove the sword from the stone. This element is commonly replaced in late 20th and 21st century popular narratives by gesturing towards an unknowable universal force such as fate, destiny, or "chosen-ness" as a way of offering similar mystical authorization without an overarchingly religious tone.

Beyond its authorization of Arthur's kingship, the "sword in the stone" motif plays out with other characters in various iterations across the Arthurian canon. In these cases, the motif correlates to the worthiness of a character with their successful or failed retrieval of the weapon. For example, in *The Quest for the Holy Grail* from the Lancelot-Grail Cycle, Galahad alone demonstrates his worthiness to pursue the Holy Grail by successfully removing a sword from a marble stone. The story sets the scene as such:

> The king [Arthur] went to see the marvel with all the others. When they came to the riverbank, they found the stone slab, made of red marble, on top of the water. A sword, which appeared to be very beautiful and valuable, was stuck into it. The sword handle, made of precious stones, was carefully inscribed with old letters, which the barons read: No one will ever withdraw me from here, except the one who will hang me at his side. He will be the world's best knight.[7]

From this passage, we can see that the location of the inscription, description of the scene itself, and authorization of the successful bearer all seem awfully familiar. Given that Malory primarily sources his Arthurian legends from the Lancelot-Grail Cycle, it is unsurprising to find such similarity here.

[7] Lacy, Norris (Ed). "The Quest for the Holy Grail" from *The Lancelot-Grail Cycle*. Boydell & Brewer: 2010, 6.

Later in the story, when Arthur tries to get Lancelot and Gawain to pull the sword from the stone slab, both knights both cite their unworthiness and fear of repercussions and refuse to make the attempt. Another knight, Perceval, does attempt to remove the sword but fails to do so. However, when Galahad comes to court, the knights lead him to the stone slab, certain that he is destined to remove it. The narrative continues:

> The king said to Galahad: "Sir, here's the adventure I spoke of: to pull the sword from the stone. The most highly esteemed knights of my court were unable to do so earlier today."
>
> Galahad replied, "My lord, that's not at all surprising, since the adventure is mine, not theirs. It is because I was so sure of obtaining this sword, that I didn't bring one to court, as you can see."
>
> He put his hand on the sword and pulled it out of the stone so easily that it seemed not to be stuck at all. Then he took the sheath, placed the sword in it, and belted it around his waist, saying to the king, "My lord, now I'm better equipped than before; I need only a shield."
>
> "Good Knight, God will send you a shield somehow," said the king, "as he has sent you this sword."[8]

In this scene, it's clear that Galahad *knows* the sword is his; it is *his* quest to retrieve it, which provides an explanation as to why the others fail. Galahad shows a sense of entitlement to the weapon he believes he is chosen by God to procure, and all others at Arthur's court seem to also recognize that he is solely destined to be able to retrieve it. Entitlement of cisgender white men in the U.S. today invokes this same fantasy of Arthurian heroism. This trial demonstrates publicly (and the public nature of this feat is important) that Galahad is, as the inscription decrees, the "world's best knight." We can thus see two different ways that the motif occurs in Arthurian literature, either as a

[8] "The Quest for the Holy Grail" from *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation,* Ed. Norris J. Lacy. Routledge: 1995, 10-11.

validation of a pretender's right to a throne or as a public declaration of a character's worthiness.

Within the Arthurian canon, many iterations of this motif occur, reinforcing how Arthurian literature in particular may be characterized as a trans-temporal palimpsest. Arthuriana builds layers upon itself across languages, literary traditions, and time. Once this motif exits the medieval period, it obtains a linguistic quality allowing it to function as a type of syntax for post-medieval narratives that employ it in new contexts, which I will discuss in case studies throughout this project.

The second commonly occurring weapon trope in medieval literature is the deicidal/otherworldly weapon, a trope that occurs often in conjunction with other weapon motifs. Martin Puhvel first characterized the "deicidal otherworldly weapon" motif in 1974 as a "motif that involves centrally the killing of a deity with a weapon uniquely suited for this purpose."[9] I want to expand this definition by acknowledging that many medieval literary weapons are otherworldly in the sense that they are supernaturally authorized (by God, most often). As weapons in the hands of God-sanctioned heroes and which have a quality unseen in more common weapons, we can move beyond the "otherworldly" quality as a common element to most heroic weapons.

By focusing on the otherworldly part of the trope, we can expand its relevance beyond weapons solely meant to kill deities. This expanded trope includes a wealth of weapons whose specialized qualities make them uniquely able to accomplish feats otherwise unattainable by the common weapon or wielder (including the rare and

[9] Puhvel, Martin. "The Deicidal Otherworldly Weapon in Celtic and Germanic Mythic Tradition," *Folklore* 83:3, 1972, 210.

exceptional task of killing a deity). In the many instances of this motif across medieval literary canons, a divine or otherwise skilled smith (often Wayland the Smith) is solely responsible for forging such a special, powerful weapon. This further emphasizes that the weapon is made in such a way as to make its material qualities as well as magical abilities distinct from other, more common weapons.

Even when such weapons are not marked specifically as deicidal, they often, as in the case of Arthur's second iconic sword Excalibur, are special or powerful in some way. These are almost invariably aristocratic weapons, carried by nobles and knights if not kings and their kin. Various medieval texts describe Excalibur and weapons of its ilk as "marvelously rich" and "more good and beautiful…than…existed in all the world," covered in precious stones, "cut-steel," etc. and these seem to be characteristic of many special literary swords. Saying that such a sword is "best in the world" is not just a title, but also a description of its power; in battles against stronger opponents, such swords demonstrate qualities such as un-breakability or offer invincibility for their masters.

For example, the scabbard accompanying Arthur's famous sword Excalibur protects him from harm by any weapons, making the king invulnerable to injury when bearing it. The magic sword from the grail quest is also described as a "beautiful, shining sword"[10] and it, too, makes the bearer invincible. While it is the enchanted scabbard of Excalibur and not the sword itself that protects the bearer, conflation in popular culture has enabled us to imagine swords as both offensive and defensive weapons, rather than their specifically penetrative and destructive paramount characterizations.

[10] "The Quest for the Holy Grail," ed. Lacy, 125.

When drawn out beyond their medieval iterations, examples of this motif show how such swords might prove invincible or protect their bearer, or perhaps have a special attack or defensive move involving energy or lightning or fire. It has become standard in heroic narratives, especially those set in pre-industrial periods or analogous fantasy timelines (i.e. before guns) to have the hero-protagonist wield a special sword, or more broadly, a special weapon. Puhvel's assessment of the deicidal other worldly weapon motif's development among Celtic, Norse, Icelandic, and Anglo-Saxon sagas and epics (and later western-European medieval romances) demonstrates the parallelism of pan-European development of similar conventions. As I will argue throughout this project, such special weapons are also often a way of identifying the hero that bears them as important and marking character development milestones throughout the narrative because of this inherent specialness that sets the weapon and its bearer apart.

The final significant weapon trope present in the Arthurian canon is the broken & re-forged sword motif. Whereas the "sword in the stone" motif concerns itself with the procurement of a special weapon, this motif follows the hero and weapon through to said weapon's use, destruction, and subsequent repair/replacement. Thomas Jay Garbáty first identified this partially as the "fallible sword" motif,[11] but fails to articulate the symbiotic quality of the hero-weapon relationship and focuses solely on the physical aspect of the sword's breakage. In Garbáty's classification, the hero's weapon fails them in battle at their moment of greatest need, understandably also serving as a catalyst for repair or replacement of this now-impotent weapon.

[11] Garbáty, Thomas Jay. "The Fallible Sword: Inception of a Motif," *The Journal of American Folklore* 75:295, 1962, 58.

Although many of the weapons used by heroic characters are special in some way, being of the highest quality, mystically strong, or invincible, and fitting with the special circumstances under which the hero acquires them, sometimes the narratives in which they appear demand a sword breaking for storytelling purposes. When such weapons do break, their destruction and repair are narratively significant and often symbolic. The motif of the broken sword that must be re-forged (and the cause of its bearer be taken up until completion) also appears in medieval literature, where it represents a narrative or thematic shift in the story.

The broken & re-forged sword motif may appear in one of two ways in Arthurian literature: firstly, with the hero-protagonist's weapon breaking in the course of some quest or battle; and second, a weapon discovered already in its broken state that must be restored or repaired as part of the protagonist's quest. Examples of the first type in Arthurian literature include Perceval, whose sword breaks in a battle against Gawain, and also Arthur's first sword (the sword in the stone) breaking into two pieces during his battle with King Pellinor, after which the Lady of the Lake gives him Excalibur.

The best example of the second type occurs when Perceval from Chrétien de Troyes's incomplete romance *Le Conte du Graal (The Story of the Grail)* finds a broken sword that needs re-forging, which along with the grail represents his journey as a "true knight," as Juliette Wood has argued.[12] This narrative structure also appears in one continuation of *The Story of the Grail*, in which Gawain takes up a broken sword and must repair it and finish its knight's incomplete quest. As with its medieval examples, this

[12] Wood, Juliette. "The Holy Grail: From Romance Motif to Modern Genre," *Folklore* 111: 2000, 169-190.

motif's appearance in post-medieval heroic narratives often correlates to the protagonist's narrative arc and functions as a structural marker in the quest and journey of the hero.

The "sword in the stone," "deicidal otherworldly weapon," and "broken & re-forged sword" motifs are the three weapon tropes that commonly appear in Arthurian literature which have become memetic, formulaically adapted into post-medieval popular narratives across medium, time, culture, and genre. Whereas the aforementioned scholars have identified and named these motifs, they have only previously been studied individually. No scholarly attempt has been made to demonstrate how these neomedieval motifs function in conjunction as heroic fantasy conventions and inventions across popular cultural heroic narratives.

Four Neomedieval Weapon Qualities in Heroic Fantasy, as Exemplified by J.R.R. Tolkien

The three main sword motifs I previously explained translate to heroic fantasy as elements of narrative structures, serving as benchmarks on the hero's journey, indicators of character development, or shortcuts for world building. Beyond the presence of these three sword motifs, I have designated four main characteristics of neomedieval weapons that will appear in the case studies this dissertation addresses. These functions relate not just to the weapons themselves, but also to the relationship between the weapon and the hero bearing it. This connection between weapons and their bearers has been discussed in individual examples across various disciplines as well as in genre- and media-specific scholarship. These narrative functions of swords enable us to interpret how they transmit these values by employing swords as rhetorical and queer objects across genre, medium, and audience. These qualities draw on the medieval and mythic literary traditions from

which the three aforementioned sword motifs originate, and have been codified over time into as neomedievalisms conventional to the heroic fantasy genre.

To explain the four functions I have catalogued for neomedieval weapons in heroic fantasy, I look to J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the authoritative origins of many of these functions in popular media. All of the neomedieval weapons we see in heroic fantasy today have Tolkien's medievalism as their inspiration in one way or another, even filtered indirectly through popular culture as they may be in some cases. I choose Tolkien to illustrate these four functions not just because he is the first to transform them from medieval to modern (in the sense of the time period rather than the literary movement) outside of an explicitly Arthurian paradigm, but also because he does so adhering closely to their medieval meanings. Thus, it is an apt control example against which to compare the subsequent case studies which will seek to challenge, complicate, or somehow undermine these weapon functions. The significance of similar neomedieval weapons in 21st century U.S. heroic literature and media can be variously adapted across genre, medium, and demographic to suit the needs of the text. The functions are as follows:

1). **Metonymic**: Weapons serve as metonymic representations of the hero and their heroism. By this I mean that a sword is not just a physical object in the hand of a character, but also serves a metaphoric function as a figurative symbol or substitution for that character and for that character's heroism. I use the term "metonymic" because the sword is both a representation of and substitution for the identity of the heroic character. This is in some cases an example of synecdoche, the one part substituted for a whole, wherein "swords" can represent people in the sense of soldiers or armies. Given the

presence of war and battle in much neomedieval fantasy, it is unsurprising that swords also serve this function beyond simply acting as vehicles for violence and destruction. Additionally, the richness or specialness of a weapon is a metaphorical representation of the noblesse or righteousness of the bearer. This is different than the below authorizing function, which has more to do with the identity of the bearer and their relationship to the weapon, whereas this metonymic function serves representationally.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's world of *The Lord of the Rings*, the sword Narsil/Andúril serves as a representation of Aragorn, descendant of Elendil and the rightful king of Gondor and Arnor. We see less of this metonymic function in Tolkien's work than his successors, but the fact remains that the shards of Narsil, known as the Sword That Was Broken, and later Andúril, The Flame of the West, represent Aragorn and his heroism. The original sword Narsil was forged by a notable Dwarven smith, Telchar of Nogrod, and became with its sibling blade (the knife Angrist) the sword of the kings of Men. Elendil's battle against Sauron serves as the legendary precursor to the *Lord of the Rings* story proper, and the blade's breakage during this battle and subsequent usage to cut the One Ring from the hand of Sauron is the symbolic beginning of the saga narrating its eventual destruction.

In this way, the sword Narsil and then later Andúril represent the story of *Lord of the Rings* itself. As the sword of kings, the shards of Narsil pass down through the lineage of Elendil from Isildur all the way to Aragorn and beyond, its symbolic presence central to the identity of those who bear it. The sword Andúril is a metonymy for Aragorn himself and for the line of kings of Gondor and Arnor. When a specific person (or group

of people) becomes so inextricably identified with a weapon in neomedieval fantasy, as I will discuss throughout this dissertation, it exemplifies this metonymic quality.

2) **Symbiotic**: Swords function symbiotically with the hero's character development via weapon integrity and breakage. Not only does the breakage of a weapon signify a failure or flaw in the bearer, but more so the integrity of the weapon acts in symbiosis with the characterization of its bearer. In this way, audiences can link the heroic journey[13] of the protagonist with the status of the weapon they carry, and interpret the breakage and repair of such weapons as progress made in the hero's character development.

In *The Lord of the Rings,* the sword Andúril fulfills this symbiotic function. Tolkien scholar Verlyn Flieger posits that in an attempt to avoid "the too-familiar motif of the pulling out of the sword, Tolkien uses instead the broken sword that is to be reforged."[14] Andúril is an essential element to the narrative, and Aragorn's storyline as well as the success of the Fellowship's quest depend on the re-forging and proper wielding of the sword. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the poem "All that is gold does not glitter" serves as a marker for this narrative arc:

> All that is gold does not glitter,
> Not all those who wander are lost;
> The old that is strong does not wither,
> Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
> From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
> A light from the shadows shall spring;

[13] Joseph Campbell's concept of the monomyth as a way of understanding the heroic journey will be referenced throughout this dissertation, though its form and structure do not always correspond to the particular functions of the neomedieval weapon motifs discussed herein.

[14] Flieger, Verlyn. "Frodo and Aragorn: The Concept of the Hero" in *Understanding the* Lord of the Rings*: The Best of Tolkien Criticism*, eds. Rose A. Zimbardo and Neil D. Isaacs. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1981, 132.

Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.

Key to this poem's significance is the link between the final lines: "Renewed shall be blade that was broken, The crownless again shall be king." There is a connection here between the blade (Narsil) being "renewed" or re-forged into Andúril and the crownless (Aragorn) becoming king, which explicitly states that the sword and the hero are intrinsically connected. As with its medieval antecedents, Tolkien's sword lore demonstrates a concern for growth and development of the heroic character. Just as Perceval cannot obtain the Holy Grail before mending the Fisher King's broken sword, or Sigmund cannot defeat the dragon Fafnir without his family's ancestral sword, neither can Aragorn be king without his sword being whole.

3) **Authorizing**: Swords serve as vehicles for and identifiable markers of public authorization and ennobling of the hero, which is an outward manifestation and recognition of a character's inner/private abilities and lineage. This function includes both private (between sword and character *and/or* between character and audience) as well as public authorization of the protagonist, and validates or legitimizes them as heroic. The authorizing function is commonly seen through a trial such as the "sword in the stone" motif from Arthurian literature, where the ability to pull the sword from the stone validates the hero as the rightful king of England. Analogous trials or rites of passage similarly authorize heroes by virtue of their success in obtaining the weapon, and the possession and usage of said weapon also publicly identifies the hero, as indicated in the metonymic function above.

In Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the sword Narsil/Andúril is the marker of Aragorn's kingship, and demonstrates not just to him but also publicly to others that he is the true and worthy king. Aragorn's worth and righteousness are outwardly marked by the shards of Narsil at his belt, and he references the sword repeatedly when defending or introducing himself. Aragorn's trial is not so much a physical one but rather a test of worthiness in the eyes of Elrond, who holds the shards of Narsil as Aragorn's inheritance until he comes of age. This follows "a literary tradition both within and without Middle-earth of outstanding swords with distinguished histories which are often passed down from generation to generation as heirlooms."[15]

The acquisition of the shards of Narsil from Elrond marks a shift from Aragon's identity as Strider, the ranger, to his actual lineage as the heir of Elendil and the rightful king of Gondor and Arnor, even when he does not claim it for himself. Even with a broken sword, Narsil validates Aragorn's claim to the throne and broadcasts his leadership:

> With the casting of the sword upon the table Aragorn publicly puts off Strider, assuming his rightful identity and all it implies. The sword proclaims the emergence of the hero. Arthur, Galahad, Sigmund, Sigurd all stand behind Aragorn in that moment.[16]

Later, the re-forged sword Andúril also "serves as a symbol of renewal and a marker of Aragorn's identity throughout the remainder of the novel."[17] Fittingly, it allows Aragorn

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[15] Whetter, K.S. and R. Andrew McDonald, "In the Hilt is Fame:' Resonances of Medieval Swords and Sword lore in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*" in *Mythlore* 25:95/96, 2006: 12.

[16] Flieger, 131.

[17] Brisbois, Michael J. "The Blade Against the Burden: The Iconography of the Sword in *The Lord of the Rings,*" *Mythlore* 27:103/104, 2008: 98.

to command the army of the dead whose betrayal must be reconciled, and to prove his mettle in the War of the Ring. However, the leadership demonstrated by Aragorn is not exclusive to his use of the sword Andúril but is emboldened and supported by it.

The reader, Michael J. Brisbois argues, should instinctively understand the relationship between Aragorn and Andúril:

> Aragorn's use of Narsil in Bree and Andúril in Rohan indicate that the reader should understand the sword as being representative of kingship and the virtues associated with it. Aragorn might use the weapon to mark his identity, but in Gondor it is not necessary for him to use it to assume the throne.[18]

In other words, Brisbois argues although the sword publicly authorizes Aragorn as king, he does not have to use it to battle for the throne against other pretenders. Andúril is known as the "Flame of the West," a title that hearkens back to other significant weapons and fulfills the "deicidal otherworldly weapon" motif, allowing (if indirectly) Sauron to be defeated. Certainly it is the destruction of the One Ring by which Sauron's defeat is made possible, but without the sword Anduríl, Aragorn would not have been about to rally as many allies to aid in their cause. The Sword of the King identifies Aragorn as a person with great authority and enables the victory over Sauron.

4) **Agentic**: Swords act as agents who choose their bearers in trials or via forces like destiny or lineage. This function demonstrates that swords are something beyond simple inanimate objects but rather possess a vibrancy drawn from a magical or divine source which enables them to act rather than to be acted upon. In other words, swords themselves *choose* who can acquire and wield them, either because they recognize the character via a trial such as with the Arthurian "sword in the stone," or because they

[18] Brisbois, 98-99.

acknowledge the lineage of the hero that makes the sword theirs by right. This function often acts in tandem with other functions, especially the authorizing function as noted above, but is an essential and distinct aspect of neomedieval fantasy weapons.

The discovery of buried or hidden swords is one way that this function plays out in various mythic traditions, employing the element of fate/destiny rather than a deity's intentions to demonstrate the importance of a character and their quest. This agentic quality shows how a character can be "chosen" by the weapon as destined to or worthy of finding it. Galahad from Arthurian legend removes a sword from a tomb, and many heroes find discarded or lost weapons on the sides of the road or in unexpected places in other medieval works. To sum up, when a hero finds or acquires a sword in some sort of special way as indicated by the narrative, we can read it as a function of the sword's agency via the author or narrative in question.

Tolkien employs this function in both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, as well as his other works like *The Silmarillion*. In *The Hobbit,* Thorin, Gandalf, and Bilbo acquire the swords Orcrist, Glamdring, and Sting, respectively. Bilbo finds this sword near the start of his adventure, after proving his mettle and becoming the type of hero that needs a sword. Bilbo "earns" Sting by his encounter with the trolls, and later uses it against several foes on their journey to the Lonely Mountain. Additionally, even though Bilbo acquires Sting by finding it in a troll hoard rather than pulling it from a stone, Sting is involved in the "sword in the stone" motif:

> Bilbo thrusts it into a wooden beam, repeating in unobtrusive fashion Odin's thrusting of the sword into the tree for Sigmund. Frodo 'accepts' it. Tolkien does not say how. But to take it he must pull it out of the beam in a repetition of Sigmund's withdrawal of the sword from the tree, Arthur's taking of the sword

> from the anvil, and Galahad's withdrawal of his sword from the stone floating in the river."[19]

Flieger here highlights how Tolkien's iteration of the sword in the stone motif participates in the broader mythic tradition and sets up its usage in fantasy narratives as conventional.

Another way that heroes can come by swords is via lineage, which is a way of identifying ownership using the relational quality of one bearer to another. The agentic quality of this is not explicit and is easily confused with the authorizing quality: we can read inheritance of weapons as the universe — whatever unseen forces operate it (a deity, fate, destiny, or some other mystical force such as Fortune) — placing the weapon into the hand in which it belongs. As discussed in the authorizing function above, Aragorn's possession of the broken sword demonstrates a continuation of his lineage, with the line of bearers all the way back to his ancestor Isildur, who cut the One Ring from Sauron's hand with the shards of his father Elendil's broken sword Narsil. In this case, we can read the narrative's author as the unseen force by which the sword acts as agent: Tolkien himself allows Aragorn to come into his rightful kingship of Arnor and Gondor because he wields the sword that marks his lineage, the weapon that links him back to Isildur.

Aragorn carries the shards of Narsil as an indicator of his potential — and indeed, uniquely positioned ability — to rectify the mistake that his relative Isildur commits in not destroying the ring. As Brisbois points out, the narrative tells us that "The sword remained shattered to serve as a reminder of Isildur's corruption by the Ring,"[20] so it is

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[19] Flieger, 139.

[20] Brisbois, Michael J. "The Blade Against the Burden," 98.

clear through the sword's re-forging that Aragorn is the one to make amends for the corruption of his ancestor. Aragorn's ability to wield the re-forged sword Andúril connects the whole sword to its ancient battle-breaking, but also Aragorn and his quest to that of Isildur.

It is Aragorn, the sword's agentic function tells us, that must mend Isildur's wrong, that must take up the crown that was lost to him, that must defeat Sauron as Isildur failed to do. This demonstrates Tolkien's familiarity with medieval sword motifs and their place in cultural narratives. While we will see more explicit examples of this in the other case studies included in this project, Tolkien's show that he is concerned with the ways that weapons find their ways into the hands of their hero-bearers, even if the weapons themselves do not demonstrate any explicit agency.

All of these functions of neomedieval weapons are present in various iterations across heroic fantasy; some texts employ all, some only one or two, and often the functions intermingle in ways that make discussion of them separately quite difficult. I have chosen to parse out these four functions or qualities because I hope to show each of them can offer something different towards to construction of heroic ideals in neomedieval heroic fantasy, despite their slippery interrelation with one another and with the generic conventions educated audiences have come to expect. While some related motifs have been explored in scholarship, I present these four functions here as a definitive way to read and interpret the rhetorical use of weapons in heroic fantasy, and as embodiments of medieval and mythic significance borne forward in time and into the postmodern space of neomedievalism. While Tolkien is arguably the first to codify these

elements into fantasy as generic conventions, subsequent creators have reinvented and reified them so such elements are continually gaining new significance for consumers.

Chapter Breakdown

This dissertation is broken down into three major chapters, although I envision future revisions of this project to include several more. Because the nexus of interconnection among genre, medium, and audience is a complicated one, there were many different possible ways to organize this project. Ultimately, the three categories I decided upon are televisual supernatural fantasy, children's and young adult fantasy fiction, and the superhero film. This dissertation is hardly exhaustive; one of the main challenges to this project is the sheer ubiquity of neomedieval weapons in media, especially in unexpected places. Often during the process of researching and writing this dissertation, I would encounter additional examples that continued to problematize my understanding of how such weapons can and do function in heroic fantasy media. Because the breadth of examples is overwhelming, I have focused on identifying trends and strategies in the functions of the neomedieval weapon in heroic fantasy. In doing so, I hope that it will be possible to assess the role that these signifiers play in deconstructing, problematizing, and reinforcing cultural ideals like white supremacy, misogyny, and ableism.

In Chapter 1, entitled "Broken Weapons, Breaking Binaries: Queering Heroism on Screen," I examine televisual media examples of heroic fantasy. I demonstrate how across disparate genres, the conventions of heroic fantasy weapons offer coherent and consistent visual rhetorics that offer queer potential, even if they fail to follow through. From its most neomedieval to its space operatic iterations, heroic fantasy on screen

employs swords to mediate the relationship between fantasy and mimesis, challenging readers and viewers to complicate their understanding of what heroism can mean in fantasy narratives. This chapter offers in-depth case studies of *Adventure Time*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer.*

Part of Chapter 2, "From Object-Orientation to Inner Power: Rhetorical Weapons and Narrative Objects in Children's and Young Adult Fantasy," originated as an article published in *Children's Literature Association Quarterly.* In this expanded chapter, I argue that the children's heroic fantasy typically operates in a two part structure: first, it engages with external object-orientation and authorizes the hero-protagonist via the neomedieval weapon, and second, it forgoes reliance on this weapon as a part of the bildungsroman structure to show identity formation and character development. As the narrative moves from external power in the form of the weapon/object to internal heroism in the hero themselves, we see the role of the neomedieval weapon shift from authorization and metonymy to operate symbiotically with the narrative development of the protagonist's heroic identity independent of said weapons. Early reliance on the neomedieval weapon gives way to a better self-awareness and coming into power of the hero themselves and often results in a sacrificing or refusal to continue relying on this weapon. This chapter addresses both urban and high fantasy examples, which vary in how explicit their mimetic elements are: for the former, I take up J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, and then present a length case study of Tamora Pierce's *Song of the Lioness* quartet as an example of the latter.

The third and final chapter of this project might at first feel like a departure from the rest of the dissertation, but it is important to address the superhero genre

independently of other types of fantasy media, as it plays a more direct role in holding up a mirror to humanity and thus is more explicit in its rhetorical characterization of heroism. In Chapter 3, "Mythical Weapon Tropes as Cultural Critique in 21st Century Superhero Media," I argue that 21st century superhero texts rhetorically exploit neomedieval and mythic weapons to make anti-fascist, pacifist, feminist, and anti-racist arguments about what heroes in the 21st century are and should be like, directly contradicting the ideal of the white, able-bodied, male superhero (even as most of the included superhero examples *are* in fact white, able-bodied, and male). This chapter's case studies include DC's *Aquaman* and *Wonder Woman*, as well as several entries from the Marvel Cinematic Universe including the *Thor*-focused films and the *The Avengers* story arc.

In the Conclusion, which was originally part of Chapter 1, I offer a close reading of a few elements from the most recent *Star Wars* trilogy, showing how it queers and destabilizes binaries through the use of lightsabers. I chose to place this case study at the end of the dissertation because it gestures towards potential future applications of the past in our present, engaging with concepts of legacy and lineage, and reminding us that as simplified and exaggerated as a character might be in their fictional depiction, heroes are complex and contradictory. Working with these texts and their cultural implications is messy and slippery, and may not be successful, but it's still worth doing.

II. BROKEN WEAPONS, BREAKING BINARIES: QUEERING HEROISM ON SCREEN

The boundary between film and television is blurrier than ever as streaming services produce content that in length, production value, and audience problematize media categorization of what were once distinct forms. Premium services like HBO (Home Box Office) have long considered themselves more like cinema than television, even if consumers access their content via a television screen in their own home. Today, content is accessible on screens as small as smartphones and as large as IMAX screens, making it unproductive to assess the category of content by its viewing locus. This is the first binary this chapter disrupts; by declining to distinguish television from the hierarchically superior label of film, this project rejects arbitrary categorization of media and instead assesses the texts involved for their engagement with neomedieval weapon motifs individually.

From the most cinematic of epics to children's cartoons, visual media are continually investing in neomedievalism to develop narratives that speak to western audiences. Such media have the opportunity (and, I argue, the responsibility) to visually challenge traditional cultural norms and diverge from what is increasingly recognizable as harmful and exclusionary hegemonic heroism. In this chapter, I will use feminist new materialism, visual media theories, and narrative theory to explore how neomedieval weapons in heroic narratives on screen problematize and/or reinforce binarism.

Given their phallic shape and recognition as a marker of important male leaders, soldiers, and figures, it is unsurprising that swords bear forth into 21st century U.S. popular culture the phallocentrism of their medieval and mythic origins. As a narrative

object removed from its original contexts, in which swords would be expected, quotidian objects carried regularly by their *appropriate* users, weapons become loaded with martial and masculine significance that does not necessarily always translate well into contemporary media. At the crux of this remediation and adaptation is the question of gender. I will address both identity-based and paradigmatic queerness, which martial objects like swords mediate and problematize within the system from which our understanding of them originates. Many of the included examples play with gender and sexuality, making them well-suited to ironic or earnest interpretation of these elements, and additionally seem invested in challenging heroism as a narrative ideal. Who gets to participate in the sword motifs I've previously identified says a lot about our conceptions of heroism, and many examples of neomedieval fantasy have a lot to say about the way gender plays into these heroic ideals.

It might at first appear that there are two principal categories that neomedieval weapons interpretations can exemplify: first, an adherent, conservative model of masculine phallocentrism that engages with the traditional aristocratic lineage of kings and nobles; and second, a "progressive" model that finds ways to empower heroes outside the traditional paradigm while simultaneously assimilating them into it. In reality, most examples fall somewhere in-between, both conservative and progressive by our interpretations. In this chapter, I offer a third potential category: a way of "breaking the wheel," as Daenerys Targaryen proclaims in George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* and its HBO television adaptation *Game of Thrones*. "Breaking the wheel" models claim to be a rejection of the entire paradigm altogether. However, just as Daenerys's assertion ultimately falls short of its promise to break the wheel altogether, so too do many texts

initially aspire to decry or disrupt the hegemonic binaries, systems, or ideologies they claim to reject, only to later become assimilated into or dependent on such conservative models. As aspirational texts striving towards paradigmatic queerness display just how far there is to go, opportunities arise for how creators can employ neomedieval weapons to destabilize white supremacist heroic ideals.

This chapter includes both live action "teen" supernatural television like *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*[21] and children's animation programs like *Adventure Time*. All of these texts are examples of crossover fiction, which might cater to a particular demographic but ultimately appeal to a much broader audience. *Adventure Time*, for example, is an absurdist post-apocalyptic fantasy from Cartoon Network intended for children, but which has gained a cult following regardless of age. Such crossover examples not only demonstrate the near-universal appeal of heroic fantasy to various demographics, but also show how narratives can speak to and interpellate different demographics of audiences within a single text.

Throughout all these examples, I hope to demonstrate most of all the consistency and cogency of the neomedieval weapon's appropriation into popular culture. Each text's distinct narrative agenda necessitates employing neomedieval weapon tropes in different ways, yet they retain an internal logic and consistency across media that speaks to our cultural understanding of this type of signifier. From its most neomedieval to its space

[21] I had hoped to include a section on the recent MTV televisual reboot of the classic 80s film *Teen Wolf*, where a Japanese-American teenage character wields a special katana-like sword which can be dismantled and reassembled, and which is also representative of her East Asian descent. Kira's story arc was unfortunately cut short when the character was written off the show and thus there was insufficient narrative explanation of how her sword functioned in the ways I describe here appropriate neomedieval weapon conventions. Nevertheless, I mention it here to reinforce that these motifs are truly universal and can appear in the most unexpected of places.

operatic iterations, heroic fantasy on screen employs swords to mediate the relationship between fantasy and mimesis, challenging readers and viewers to complicate their understanding of what heroism can mean in fantasy narratives.

Supernatural Fantasy on Screen and the Heroine's Neomedieval Weapon

Both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* are live-action fantasy television shows airing from the mid to late 90s to early aughts, contending with and promulgating third-wave feminism that dominated cultural discourse at the time. This particular wave of feminism was ostensibly more intersectional[22] than previous efforts could claim to be, yet its radicalism was entirely rooted in upholding white supremacy. As texts coming out of this social movement, *Buffy* and *Xena* both reflect the "girl power" sensibility while remaining within the gender binary and perpetuating the systemic imbalance in power dynamics and tendency toward oppression of those who stand out from the "norm" inherent in white supremacy. Sometimes when media attempt to redefine masculine heroic paradigms using female protagonists, they ultimately fall prey to female exceptionalism and reify complicity in maintaining masculine hegemony in their attempts to do so.

Xena: Warrior Princess is an example of this, queering temporality, offering a feminine paradigm of heroism, and presenting queer subtext revolutionary for television at the time, but which continues reinvesting in binarism and hegemonic masculinity even as it does so. Others, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* not only present alternative ways

[22] "Intersectional feminism," a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 80s, refers to feminism that addresses how racial, gender, class, ability, religious, and ethnic inequality interact to exacerbate systemic inequity. This is in direct conflict with what has been termed "white feminism," which sees gender as the primary touchpoint of inequality and thus fails to serve anyone but upper class, white, "western" women.

of understanding these same weapon conventions via female protagonists, but actively attempt to destabilize or disrupt the gender and power binaries inherent in hegemonic heroism while doing so. While *Buffy*'s finale makes strides towards the aforementioned concept of "breaking the wheel," continued investments in whiteness and traditional femininity lessen its efficacy as social critique. Although their airtimes overlapped and at first glance we might write off both *Xena* and *Buffy* as male fantasies of female empowerment, both pursue a feminist agenda and employ the aforementioned neomedieval weapon motifs, making them appropriate examples to address here, even though they fall short of an intersectional ideal.

In *Xena: Warrior Princess,* the title character Xena wields a circular bladed weapon called a chakram.[23] The chakram employs many of the functions of the neomedieval weapon in popular fantasy, acting as an authorizing and identifying object in Xena's hands, functioning metonymically as a representation of Xena herself, in symbiosis with the status of Xena's heroic journey. Additionally, because the chakram is limited in its usage to those very close to Xena, it appears to also represent the agentic function of neomedieval weapons in popular heroic fantasy. While the shape of the chakram, the circle, differs from the pointed and often penetrative design of the more phallic weapons such as swords, there are numerous weapons throughout this dissertation that are not swords and yet act like them. Furthermore, the phallic or yonic appearances of weapons might be symbolically significant but do not practically impact a hero's

[23] Like the sword's regular appearance in many western pre-modern narratives, the chakram appears all the way back to 5th century BCE literary epics including the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana,* as well as throughout literary and cultural texts of the Indian subcontinent since. While the shape of the chakram, the unending circle, differs from the phallic shape of the sword and its analogues, chakrams were not considered women's weapons and were carried and wielded by men.

ability to wield them based on gender. Sara Ahmed's concept of queer use applies to characters who are not the intended wielders of given weapons throughout this project, but these conditions of use are set by each narrative individually or by common sense/conventions coming from popular discourse and are never based solely on the shape of a weapon.

Xena's setting in quasi-ancient Greece, the Middle East, and Asia employs a playfully anachronistic aesthetic, evoking once again the concept of asynchrony. Rather than anachronism, *Xena* strategically places ancient and modern into the same temporality as is possible with the magic of editing. The series follows Xena, a warrior woman, as she attempts to make amends for her past warmongering violence, and Gabrielle, a young bard, who joins her on their travels. Its opening words, much like those reiterated in *Buffy's* opening theme, similarly articulate the exceptionalism of its female protagonist:

> In a time of ancient gods, warlords and kings.../A land in turmoil cried out for a hero. / She was Xena, a mighty princess forged in the heat of battle. / The power...the passion...the danger... / Her courage will change the world.

Largely focusing on the show's cult fandom, self-reflexivity, and heroics, scholars and fans most passionately examine its homosexual "sub-textual" relationship between Xena and Gabrielle. I add to these conversations, and those more broadly examining the role of neomedievalism in fantasy media to address how *Xena* positions the chakram, *not* the sword, as central to the title character's heroic identity, and how it decenters the western heritage of the Arthurian romance in favor of Eastern approaches to the self and the heroic figure.

Xena's "round killing thing" is the most significant weapon on the series and also a symbolic representation of Xena herself, employing the neomedieval weapon functions I outlined in the Introduction. We might also read the chakram as one aspect of this particular text that adheres to a pattern among heroic narratives attempting to assimilate female protagonists into a masculine paradigm. That is to say, while the chakram is *not* a "woman's weapon," it does engage with models of heroism outside the traditional Arthurian paradigm, offering if not an explicit rejection of the associated hegemonic ideals, at least an alternative to them.

Despite its importance throughout the series, many scholars have mischaracterized or understated the importance of the chakram to Xena's heroic persona. Stacey D'Erasmo's foundational piece "Xenaphilia" identifies Xena as defeating "insane numbers of bad guys with her kicks, her spear, or her sword," completely disregarding the iconic chakram entirely. Similarly, Sherrie Inness's 1998 book chapter "A Tough Girl for A New Century" boldly dismisses the chakram's importance: "Although she sometimes depends on a weapon called a chakram – similar to a circular boomerang – to dispatch the human predators who risk life and limb by challenging her, she is more likely to have a sword fight with her adversaries." Since most Xena scholarship was published concurrently with the show's early years, few have addressed what I see as critical neomedieval elements of the series because they occur after *Xena's* scholarly boom.

Throughout the series, we can observe *Xena* acknowledging and discarding the Arthurian neomedievalism in which most of the heroic fantasy in this dissertation participates. Xena's trans-temporal aesthetic establishes its awareness of neomedieval

heroic narrative conventions early on, and uses this temporal queerness to poke fun at the conventions with which it engages. In season 2 episode "Orphan of War," the series presents the sword in the stone and broken & reforged sword motifs: Xena's long lost son Solan inherits a sword from his adoptive father, that, when it accidentally shatters, reveals a stone that will empower its bearer. Xena encourages Solan to throw the sword into a lake as Bedivere does for Arthur with the sword Excalibur. As a reminder, this is a series set in Ancient Greece, pre-medieval rather than post; yet its temporal queerness is present throughout. In this explicit evocation of Arthuriana, *Xena* acknowledges the western neomedievalism to which much heroic fantasy ascribes, engaging with it superficially but ultimately with few consequences we might expect to see. In other words, past this episode, the swords involved have no lasting impact on either Xena or Solan, and we never hear about them again. They are, I might argue, meaningless beyond a gesture towards the familiar.

A similar gesture towards Arthurian neomedievalism occurs in season 3 episode "Gabrielle's Hope," when Xena comically removes the legendary sword from the stone and then nonchalantly replaces it into the stone, fulfilling and disregarding the Knights of the Round Table's mission without even knowing it. *Xena* thus establishes an element of self-reflexivity, its participation in these neomedieval conventions unwanted and unimportant. We could also read this as a rejection of the authorizing function that the neomedieval weapon often performs in heroic fantasy, interpreting the show's almost flippant usage of this motif as a way to disenfranchise the authority of the sword (man) in favor of some other institution, or perhaps Xena herself. I would compare this moment to Black Widow's refusal to test whether she can pick up Mjolnir from the *Age of Ultron*

example in Chapter 3, as it seems clear in both of these cases that the heroines involved are not interpellated by the weapon that authorizes patriarchal heroism.

Though we are encouraged to interpret these moments with Xena superficially engaging the Arthurian neomedievalism as humorous, they serve an additional purpose. These episodes are a reminder that *Xena* continues the pattern of female-led narratives where swords are often not the primary or preferred weapon. Rather, they tend to prioritize other non-phallic objects, concepts, or powers, and relegating these phallic weapons to a minor or negative status or for a male character instead of the heroine (with some exceptions, of course).[24] Xena's chakram continues this pattern, casually rejecting the swords from Arthurian literature and instead employing these neomedieval weapon motifs with the chakram. The explicit association between Xena and her chakram adheres to neomedieval weaponry motifs, but unlike the masculine heroism of its origins, the narrative development of the chakram demonstrates that Xena's femininity is integral to finding balance as a heroine. We might look to televisual heroines' weapons, then, as a response to the male-centric heroic paradigm, in which knowledge of these motifs allows for a more nuanced, complex critique of heroism on shows like *Xena: Warrior Princess*. With *Xena* in particular, we can see that the particulars of heroism may change with the times, but we will likely always be in need of a "girl with a chakram."

One of the qualities linking the chakram to its sword-analogues in medieval romance is that it serves as an identifier of Xena as a hero, following the metonymic function I discussed earlier. The unique weapon validates Xena's identity to others on

[24] A special case of *Wonder Woman* and Godkiller will be addressed in the final chapter of this dissertation, which focuses on the superhero film in particular.

multiple occasions. For example, Xena's foil Callisto, a warrior woman she "creates" by destroying and killing everyone and everything Callisto loves as a child, exploits the unequivocal association of the chakram with Xena, framing her as a rampaging warlord despite the warrior princess's commitment to making amends for her violent past. In season 1 episode "Callisto," the chakram is how she recognizes Xena and knows against whom to exact revenge, demonstrating its capacity to stand in for Xena herself. In season 5 episode "Looking Death in the Eye," after mistaking Xena and Gabrielle for dead, the war god Ares buries them beneath Mt. Etna and places the chakram atop Xena's sword as a gravestone, marking her grave and demonstrating that for Xena, the chakram is inextricably associated with her enough to be beside her even in death. In season 6 episode "Legacy," after Xena and Gabrielle emerge from their 25-year sleep, the chakram is also the only way Xena and Gabrielle can prove their identities are genuine, as people know only Xena the Warrior Princess can wield the chakram. The series thus characterizes the chakram not only as a unique and special weapon, but exclusively and explicitly as a symbolic representation of Xena herself.

In addition to victims, allies, and foes recognizing the metonymic function of the chakram to represent Xena, Xena herself concretizes this connection. In season 4 episode "Between the Lines," Xena constructs the symbol of Venus on her foot using a tattoo of the chakram along with a cross (or, one might argue, a sword). Xena creates this symbol and agrees with Gabrielle that it will serve as a marker of their presence across time and space. Indeed, the chakram is so critical and exclusive to Xena's identity that only she can properly wield it, which follows the agentic function of neomedieval weapons. Callisto, the enemy that she "created," can wield the chakram, but not as adeptly as Xena,

as I will discuss later. Similarly, Xena's daughter Eve, immaculately co-conceived with Callisto's angelic spirit, can catch and deflect the chakram, but not wield it. Only upon Xena's death in the series finale does her closest ally, friend, and love, Gabrielle, inherit the chakram. Xena's association with the weapon is one of exclusivity, as its use is limited to her and those closest to her. The chakram thus exemplifies in this way the agentic quality, choosing who can wield it and demonstrating a kind of loyalty to those associated with Xena. Beyond this agentic quality, the chakram's symbiotic and authorizing properties offer the clearest point of neomedieval weapon motif adherence.

In penultimate season 4 episode "The Ides of March," the symbiotic function of Xena's weapon becomes explicit. In its climactic scene, an enraged godly Callisto throws Xena's chakram, hitting Xena in her spine and falling to the ground. This demonstrates Callisto's failure to properly wield the circular weapon, as it strikes Xena and breaks, failing to rebound like a boomerang when properly thrown by its rightful bearer. Xena crumples to the ground, paralyzed, and in a stunning parallel, the chakram shatters into two halves upon striking her, lying as broken on the ground as Xena is. This scene is pivotal because it demonstrates that in the show's narrative, the chakram and Xena's physical states are inextricably linked. When Xena is broken, so is the chakram, and vise versa. This is a perfect manifestation of the symbiotic function I outline as a critical component of neomedieval weapon motifs in popular fantasy, showing how the weapon and the bearer are linked narratively.

The fulfillment of this narrative arc in season 5 episode "Chakram" further reinforces the pattern of this neomedieval motif. Xena and Gabrielle are resurrected from their crucifixion at the end of the previous season, returned physically intact. However,

upon being handed the broken pieces of her chakram, Xena asks "what is this thing, anyway?" clearly unaware of the weapon's significance to her or of her heroic identity in general. As with its medieval origins, finding or inheriting a broken weapon prompts a heroic quest to repair it, usually not directly through mundane means, but by overcoming some inner flaw of the hero or demonstrating their growth and progress in a particular area. In other words, Xena repairs the chakram by fixing some part of herself that is lacking. The connection between the two is built into the structure of the narrative.

Xena: Warrior Princess uses the symbiotic function of neomedieval weapons with the chakram's breakage demanding she achieve balance. In Xena's case, in order to repair her weapon, she and Gabrielle travel to a temple protecting the yin-yang altar holding another chakram, the light equal to Xena's dark one. Unsurprisingly, all who attempt to retrieve this object perish, a reminder that neomedieval weapons have both an authorizing and agentic function and can choose *not* to authorize a hero just as easily as to authorize them. However, Xena successfully removes the light chakram but still does not recall her warrior identity, demonstrating that it is her chakram specifically that matters, not just any weapon. Even after placing her dark chakram in its place on the altar, which magically repairs it, Xena's memory still does not return. This demonstrates that the connection between Xena and her chakram comprises both a physical one (Xena's body is already restored) and a metaphorical one (because her mind is still broken). This reflects the other commonality of the motif: instead of overcoming some sort of obstacle that allows for the restoration of the broken weapon, sometimes the mending of the weapon conversely rewards the hero.

Thus, for Xena, neither the trial of obtaining the chakram of light nor the feat of repairing her own is not what's necessary to restore her heroic identity. When Xena holds her now-repaired dark chakram and the light chakram together above her head, the temple's magic fuses them into what fans call the Balanced, Yin Yang, Splitting, or Super Chakram. In doing so, Xena's chakram transforms from its circular shape into the yin-yang symbol, restoring not only the integrity of the original weapon but also allowing it to split into two curved blades for hand-to hand combat. In restoring the chakram, Xena also regains her memory and heroic identity, bringing her a dualistic balance between mind and body, light and dark, and masculinity and femininity. Thus, like its medieval analogues, this new and improved chakram represents Xena's heroism, and as a symbiotic synecdoche of Xena herself, the weapon's integrity correlates both literally and figuratively to that of its bearer. The chakram physically breaks when Xena's body does, and upon restoring its symbolic unity, Xena once again becomes whole.

Despite the apparent queerness of the subtextual (or at times, textual) romance between Xena and Gabrielle, and the series' desire to place Xena on a heroic journey, the show does little to actually queer the neomedievalism with which it engages. The show is still undoubtedly based in a white history and lineage despite engaging with pre-modern elements of the Middle and Far East. *Xena* nevertheless embraces traditionally masculine qualities like physical strength and courage in its heroine, and we can even read into the Xena and Gabrielle relationship a heteronormative masculine/feminine dynamic. In conclusion, the playful and even queer nature of the show's temporality is perhaps its most disruptive element, but at its heart adheres to the expectations audiences have around the heroic journey of its protagonist.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer with its late 90s high school setting could not be more different than the Ancient Greek locus of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, but its usage of neomedieval weapon motifs to articulate the heroic journey of its protagonist demonstrates similar trends to the latter. Audiences may draw interpretations of neomedieval weapons in female-led tv heroism that shift from a phallocentric paradigm into one that embraces and adapts to new feminine and/or potentially queer models of heroism. Although examples like *Buffy*[25] are certainly more progressive than some of the adherent models we see coming out of the high fantasy genre, they fail to directly challenge the cis-heteronormativity of the previously male-exclusive tradition from which we draw western neomedievalism. Just as with any text, we can interpret the fantasy narratives of *Buffy* having a mimetic quality from which we can draw real-world implications or arguments.

Given that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* follows the "monster of the week" model as well as having season-long discrete narrative arcs, it is unsurprising that much of *Buffy* follows the Slayer discovering, researching, and resourcefully disposing of new threats as they arise. These "monsters" of the week typically reflect the concerns of culture at the time of *Buffy*'s production, and offer a fantastical way to experience the hells of high school and associated teenage anxieties through the metaphor of monstrosity. While its

[25] The 1997-2003 WB/UPN television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is itself a reworking of the 1992 feature film of the same name. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ran for seven seasons and spurred a five-season spinoff, *Angel*, featuring several of *Buffy*'s characters. Both shows have gained cult followings and maintain popular and scholarly associations, with much work dedicated to the polarizing creator Joss Whedon's ostensibly feminist televisual narratives. It is not the project of this dissertation to focus on the auteur Joss Whedon, but to consider how his series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* offers an important feminist critique of the neomedieval weapon motif and how, more generally, we as viewers can also de-center the discussion of Buffy from Whedon himself.

social agenda speaks primarily to the "girl power" feminism characteristic of 90s/00s media, *Buffy* uses this monstrous lens to address bullying, partner abuse, poverty, sexual awakenings, school shootings, depression, feeling powerless, parental neglect, moral panic, and many more real-world circumstances. Whedon's original vision for the series, that "high school is hell," thus plays out using this extended metaphor.

Examples of female exceptionalism often don't do much more than reinforce the rule, and while *Buffy* is certainly no stranger to these issues, it does also present some ruptures that offer potentially progressive interpretations. In particular, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* uses neomedieval weapon motifs with the Slayer Scythe to manifest a break from tradition and depart from the series' typical binarism of male/Watcher, female/Slayer, and many/one, restructuring the power dynamic in favor not only of one Slayer, but all Slayers. This shift from female exceptionalism to female dominance appears to be the ultimate feminist action the series can make in its finale. This *Buffy* case study is well worth examining for its negotiation of creative/capitalist agenda, its complicated relationship to auteur Joss Whedon, and its reliance on white feminism, all of which make it rife for complications and contradictions.

The complexity of *Buffy*'s engagement with hegemonic binarism is readily apparent with both of the significant neomedieval weapons on the series, the stake and the scythe. The stake holds a special status as the preferred weapon of the Vampire Slayer. It is a quotidian weapon, small and powerful in the hands of Buffy, but able to dust a vampire by anyone capable enough to wield it. With the Slayer as the only one with the "strength and skill" to fight the various forces of darkness, there is an element of theoretical exclusivity to the stake's usage despite the reality of its commonality

throughout the series. The series' seventh and final season also introduces the Slayer Scythe, a long-lost weapon originally used to create the line of Vampire Slayers, and which comes to be inextricably associated with and metonymic for the Slayer as heroine while also being the vehicle by which Buffy (via Willow's magic) frees herself from the sole responsibility and destiny of her calling. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* uses both the stake and the scythe to problematize the neomedieval weapon's exclusively phallocentric significance. The series co-opts this symbol of masculinity and reframes it as not only explicitly feminine but also inclusive of and accessible to all, using the past to make a better future. Though the *Buffy* finale presents a feminist vision of hope, its direct rejection of the cis-heteronormativity of the Watcher institution (and the mimetic patriarchal implications it stands for) could be interpreted as too little, too late.

With *Buffy*, I argue that the everyday weapon of the stake acts as an authorizing weapon, while the final season's iconic weapon the "slayer scythe" employs the agentic and metonymic functions of the neomedieval weapon. In the context of Joss Whedon's Slayerverse, the show very clearly identifies the "rules" of its world that isolate the Slayer as a hero:

> Into every generation a slayer is born: one girl in all the world, a chosen one. She alone will wield the strength and skill to fight the vampires, demons, and the forces of darkness; to stop the spread of their evil and the swell of their number. She is the Slayer.[26]

While this does not directly reference the tools the Slayer uses, namely the stake, it does identify several things explicitly. The Slayer is unique, female, and specially equipped for battle against supernatural creatures. It is *she* who is special, yet not just anyone can

[26] Whedon, Joss. "Welcome to the Hellmouth," *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, March 10 1997.

wield a stake. This exclusivity is explicitly offered with the scythe, which is a weapon only for, and solely representative of, slayers.

Despite being numerous and easily replaceable unlike some of the other neomedieval heroic weapons throughout this project, the stake is prominently featured as *the* weapon of the Slayer. Certainly, other demonic and supernatural forces occasionally require more specialized weaponry, and Buffy is nothing if not resourceful, often exploiting her environment to slay "big bads" however possible. But the stake is ubiquitous, quotidian, and unassuming, Buffy's everyday weapon, which she carries with her at all times. While we very infrequently see characters actually fashioning these stakes, it is clear they are rather primitive, whittled pieces of wood shaved to a sharp point at one end. Despite their simplicity, viewers quickly understand the stake to be a central, essential weapon to Buffy as she does what the title suggests: she slays vampires. A quick stake to the chest, making sure to strike the heart, and a vampire simply fades away into dust. These "dustings" represent the most common combat scenario on *Buffy*, with her conducting patrols for vampires in Sunnydale, which sits on a hellmouth and attracts supernatural creatures there from far and wide.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer establishes Buffy as the heroine perpetually oppressed by and trapped within a male institutional paradigm, using the stake as a phallic representation of the Watcher's Council and their creation of the First Slayer. By expressing individuality, independence, and eventually outright rejection of the Watcher's Council in the series, Buffy reclaims her heroism. At first, as is the case with examples of female exceptionalism, Buffy advocates only for herself, but then with the final season's introduction of the slayer scythe, ultimately subverts its origin as a male

creation to queer the very concept of the Slayer, offering a more inclusive, accessible mode of heroism unbound from male supervision and rule. Though the *Buffy* finale presents a feminist vision of hope, this direct rejection of the cis-heteronormativity of the Watcher institution and all it stands for is too little, too late.

Accordingly, we can read much of *Buffy* as having a double significance: One, the superficial, literal level: it's a snake demon in the basement of a fraternity eating unsuspecting high school girls to make the frat brothers rich. Two, the metaphorical: attending a fraternity party as a high school girl is dangerous and college men will exploit them for their own gain if possible. It is with this lens in mind that I suggest we consider the stake's literal and metaphorical significance to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Several examples from the series identify Buffy as different or special because of —or rather, marked by—her use of the stake.

Buffy carries at least one with her every day and all the time, even in her purse at school, which makes sense to the viewer and to characters who know she is the Slayer. But for those who do not know about her secret calling, it simply reinforces her as an outcast, a weirdo, rather than as some sort of special supernatural huntress. It's a penetrative object that functions like a dagger. In the Buffyverse, only women can be Slayers, but women are not the only ones who can wield stakes. Though they may not possess the titular heroine's "strength and skill," Buffy's friends often attempt to help her in her slayage duties, patrolling cemeteries, going on stakeouts, and researching "big bads" to help Buffy achieve her goals. Because Sunnydale, the fictional town in which the series is set, is built upon a hellmouth, there is no shortage of vampires, demons, and other "forces of darkness" against which Buffy and her friends must struggle.

Much of *Buffy* explores the struggle between Buffy having this higher calling as a Slayer and just trying to be a normal teenager. This reinforces that although set within our real world in the 20th and later 21st century, the show adheres to the narrative and structural expectations we would have for a heroic journey in an epic or romance from a different time and which have come to be features of supernatural televisual narratives. Much like the demigod in between the human and divine, Buffy's otherness marks her as existing between the two, never fully part of one or the other. While this is often presented humorously, the series also seriously tackles this tension between Buffy's human life and her supernatural one, especially in the time before she is "out" as a Slayer to her mother.

In the pilot episode "Welcome to the Hellmouth," Buffy's bag is overturned when another student bumps into her, and instead of tampons and chapstick, Buffy has a wooden stake in her purse, marking her as decidedly different from the other high school students. This is humorously highlighted when she gathers her belongings and continues down the hallway, accidentally leaving a stake on the floor for her later-friend Xander to find and say, "Wait, you forgot your… stake." From the very beginning of the series, marked differences like this indicate to audiences that Buffy straddles the two worlds of reality and fantasy, often pulled in either direction at the expense of the other.

One way in which series uses humor to address this disconnect between Buffy's calling as a Vampire Slayer and her more expected career as a high school (and later college) student is to highlight another point of tension - between the series' ostensible feminism and its actual phallocentric lens. This tension results from having a "feminist" heroine, Buffy, being created, authorized, manipulated, and controlled by the Watcher's

Council. I want to note that although the Watcher's Council is ostensibly *not* an all-male institution, the only female Watcher ever featured on the series is a villainess, Gwendolyn Post, who appears in season three but in the episode's climax is revealed to not actually be associated with the Watcher's Council. Therefore, the viewer is left with a sense that Slayers (female) are at the mercy of Watchers (male), of which Buffy's mostly-sympathetic Watcher Rupert Giles is the sole partial exception.

With these binaries in place (feminism/phallocentrism, Slayers/Watchers), it is unsurprising that the series plays with these conceptions by balancing humor and gravitas. One way in which *Buffy* does so is by coding the wooden stake—a phallic object—as central to Buffy's vocational identity.[27] This is an association about which all members of the Scooby gang (comprising Giles, Willow, Xander, and to a lesser extent at various points, Oz, Cordelia, Anya, and Tara) are well aware. Because the series grapples with burgeoning sexuality, including loss of innocence, queer discovery, and sexual autonomy, this phallocentrism surrounding the image of the stake is an important one to the semiotics of the series as a whole.

In the iconic, Emmy-nominated season four episode "Hush," which is almost entirely absent of dialogue and relies on physical comedy and pantomime for communication, this sexual innuendo with the stake plays out for laughs. In a scene where the Scooby gang are strategizing how to address the threat of the Gentlemen, who have stolen all the voices in Sunnydale, there is a misunderstanding where Buffy mimes staking a vampire, but without an actual stake in her hand, it appears to those around her

[27] All sexual innuendo fully intended.

as a sexual act. This staking motion to Buffy seems perfectly obvious and normal, because of course it is—she stakes vampires every day. But in the absence of the visual marker of the stake, others view the gesture as obscene and are unable to process it as anything else. When Buffy realizes the misunderstanding, she grabs the stake from her bag to repeat the staking motion with weapon in hand, which everyone suddenly understands and feels embarrassment for thinking otherwise. That the absence of a stake could so definitively shift her colleagues' understanding of Buffy speaks to its semiotic significance on the series and reinforces that the phallic nature of the stake is purposeful.

While this entire scene is comedic, it asks audiences to consider the implications of this stake's sexualization in the hands of the female protagonist. Though this example falls under the categories of physical and miscommunication humor, it betrays something more significant about Buffy, and about Slayers in general. Without the stake, Buffy is still as strong and skilled, certainly, but it serves as a visual reminder not only to the viewing audience, but also to those around Buffy, that she is the Slayer, Chosen. By associating Buffy's Slayer status itself with the weapon she uses — a phallic weapon that is useful only insomuch as it is penetrative — it elides Buffy's power into that of the Watchers instead. In this moment, when the stake is *not* present, Buffy's slaying is unrecognizable for what it is. Rather, Buffy herself is relegated to a young woman making a sexually suggestive motion, something that is much more acceptable even as it is transgressive. With the symbol of her power removed, this "feminist" show comically denies Buffy the powerful identity that is her birthright.

There is an alternate way we could interpret this scene: the stake is, of course, a symbol which itself was already more associated with the creators of the Slayer than the

Slayer herself, so removing it from Buffy's hands also figuratively removes the authority of the Watcher's Council from what they see simply as their weapon - their active Slayer. In this way, by removing the object that symbolically authorizes Buffy as the Slayer, the series also *objectifies* her in turn, making Buffy herself into the weapon, rather than the stake. I have discussed elsewhere in this project how the relationship between wielder and weapon can become slippery, and how we as viewers can interpret weapons as characters just as readily as we can see heroes as weapons. This is one such example where Buffy as the Council's weapon becomes (and certainly they see and treat her as such) an object. The stake may be the tool the Slayer uses, but the Slayer is the tool the Council uses. In this way we can see that Buffy's empowerment is only partial, as she is still at the mercy of the system and institutions that regulate her – just as "girl power" feminism where we see "strong" women are only as strong as their oppressors allow them to be.

At various points throughout the series, Buffy "quits" the Council, going rogue as a Slayer, or at least figuratively distancing herself from the oversight and micromanagement of the Council as an institution and/or the Watchers as their representatives. Technically, after her death at the hands of a vampire in the season one finale, "Prophecy Girl," Buffy is no longer the active Slayer. She has died, ending her tenure as the "one girl in all the world with the strength and skill to fight vampires, demons, and forces of darkness." Her successor, Kendra, becomes the active Slayer, and upon Kendra's death, Faith is called to be the Slayer. Despite these active Slayers being called and visiting the hellmouth in Sunnydale, Buffy remains active in her patrols, considering it her responsibility to protect her town regardless. The Watcher's Council's

regulation of Buffy following her death and despite the presence of another Slayer breaks the very rules upon which the *Buffy* world is supposed to operate. This demonstrates that a rupture occurs as early as "Prophecy Girl" in the series and invites viewers to question the paradigm of the series itself.

Such ruptures are significant because they demonstrate the queer potential of operating outside proscriptive instructions. This gesture towards Sara Ahmed's concept of "conditions of use" identifies how things *should be* used, versus how they *can be*. In that vein, Buffy's a queer Slayer from the beginning in that she upsets the traditional Slayer role and relationship to the Council and the world around her. But this queer use erupts throughout the series narratively as Buffy shifts from her reliance on the stake, on the authority given to her by the Watcher's Council, into reliance on herself. In other words, she moves from *being* the weapon of someone else to playing by her own rules and enabling others to do the same. The Council's aforementioned refusal to consider Buffy retired despite her fulfilling her duty and dying in "Prophecy Girl" clarifies that she is simply a weapon in their hands, an object to be wielded as they choose, as long as she is useful.[28]

Season three episode "Helpless" further demonstrates how the Council of Watchers objectifies and oppresses Buffy as a tool at their disposal, not recognizing her humanity or individuality. This episode also demonstrates that although Rupert Giles, the only "good" Watcher with whom we are supposed to sympathize, loves and cares for

[28] This exploitative relationship between Buffy and the Council provides a long term teleology for Buffy's character development, showing her almost (but not completely) under their control pre-series, all the way through to the series finale "Chosen," where she and Willow permanently shift the balance of power in favor of Slayers.

Buffy as a father, he is still adherent to the demands of the institution and upholds patriarchy when pressed. In this episode, we see Buffy turn 18 years old—the age of "adulthood" in the United States—and thus the episode focuses on this milestone's significance. "Helpless" centers on the dual betrayal of Buffy first by her actual father, who abandons her for work and does not come from Los Angeles to Sunnydale to celebrate her birthday with her, and secondly—more importantly—by her surrogate father, her Watcher Giles.

Giles's betrayal manifests as hypnotizing Buffy and injecting her with a serum to remove her supernatural strength and skills, weakening her to the level of a "normal" teenage girl. He does this as part of a trial traditionally given to the Slayer upon her eighteenth birthday, if she happens to reach it, when the Watcher incapacitates the Slayer and leads her to a residence where a vampire has been held in order to present a challenge for her to survive and escape. Without the use of the Slayer's powers, this trial is tantamount to torture and near-certain death, and given as it is by the authorizing institution of the Watcher's Council, it emphasizes the power imbalance characteristic of the relationship between Watcher and Slayer. This "trial" is a reminder that the Slayer's power remains subjugated to that of the Watchers, that her spark of empowerment is temporary, removable, and at their discretion.

This episode demonstrates how Buffy's exceptionalism in her reliance on others outside her Watcher for slaying assistance and support is an asset rather than as the liability the Watcher's Council considers it. It does so by highlighting the incompetence and hubris of the male-coded Watcher's Council, which leads to Buffy's mother being kidnapped by the escaped vampire. The relationship dynamic between Buffy and Giles

drastically shifts in this episode, as does Giles's relationship to the rest of the Council. Given that he is unwilling to completely follow-through with the trial and reveals to Buffy the nature of his betrayal, he is fired. This demonstrates how ultimately, both Giles and Buffy are unwilling to participate in and reproduce the abusive power dynamic between the Watcher's Council and the Slayer, but also identifies another example in which Buffy's powers and her official status as Slayer are disconnected.

Other points along this journey demonstrate Buffy's movement towards independence and feminist embodiment. For example, following "Helpless" in season three, the Council assigns Buffy a new Watcher, Wesley Wyndham-Pryce, whom Buffy disregards entirely as an authority figure and leader. Instead, she continues to follow the guidance of Giles and collaborate with him and with her entire Scooby gang. Similarly, later episodes in season three show Buffy firing Wesley and verbally dissociating herself from the Council, at whatever cost. The defeat of that season's big bad, Mayor Richard Wilkins, succeeds without the aid and resources of the Council, but instead using the assistance of Buffy's entire graduating class. This is an early example of *Buffy* crowdsourcing heroism to reject the exceptionalism the series' rules set forth from its inception.

At other points in the series, such as in season five's episode "Intervention," Buffy identifies the Council as simply putting her into a situation where she must jump through hoops for their assistance, which she ultimately rejects. "Intervention" shows Buffy refusing the "help" of the Council in favor of her own team's ability to research and support her fight against season five's big bad, the goddess Glorificus (Glory). Even facing a god, Buffy's confidence and trust in the Scooby gang supersede the authority

and resources provided by the Watcher's Council, and indeed, their resulting success reiterates that Buffy *does not* need the Council and can operate outside them while still performing her job adequately. One might argue that Buffy's death in the season five finale, "The Gift," shows that she is not as powerful without the Council's aid, but she does defeat Glory and save the world, so as a measurement of Buffy's competency, that argument holds no water.

Buffy's weapons become the vehicle for this teleology of self-determination and independence from patriarchy. As I discussed earlier in this section, *Buffy* first uses the stake to identify Buffy as an authorized Slayer, as the one girl Chosen by the Watcher's Council and managed by them and by her Watcher Giles. As Buffy moves away from these typical and accepted conditions of use, her reliance on the stake lessens. In the show's seventh and final season, *Buffy* introduces a new weapon, the Slayer Scythe, which becomes the symbol of Buffy's departure from the Watcher's Council and queers the Slayer calling entirely. In the season 7 episode "End of Days," Buffy discovers a scythe embedded in a stone in the basement of an abandoned building in Sunnydale. She goes there because the season's big bad, The First Evil, uses a preacher named Caleb as their physical delegate to lead her there.

This Slayer Scythe's description is indicative of its status as a special heroic weapon akin to many other neomedieval weapons we have discussed throughout this project. The scythe is red and silver, an axe on one end with a wooden stake on the other. It is stuck in the stone just like the sword in the stone of Arthurian legend. When Buffy pulls the scythe out, wielding it against Caleb and his vampire cronies, they flee and Buffy ends up having a conversation with an Ancient Woman, who says to her, "You

pulled it out of the rock. I was one of those who put it in there." She continues in a serious fashion, explaining: "A weapon. A scythe. Forged in secrecy for one like you who... I'm sorry. What's your name?" When Buffy tells the woman her name, it is played like a joke, given that Buffy is quite unusual and a unique name, not one that the women who forged and hid this scythe would ever think to describe the slayer who comes to collect it.

The way this woman explains the origins of the scythe, it is a weapon made *by women* to circumvent the male control that the first men took when creating the First Slayer. In other words, it is a reaction to the institution of Watchers trying to keep slayers in line. The scythe, which is arguably still a phallic, destructive weapon, is also the object that allows women to reclaim their power from the patriarchal system that has previously been in control of them, from the first Slayer's creation to the current moment. We can connect the imagery of the Slayer Scythe to the feminist icon of the labrys, a double-sided axe that symbolizes matriarchy and also became a lesbian feminist emblem in queer movements of the mid-late twentieth century. This could also gesture towards Willow's characterization as a bisexual or lesbian woman and her particular magical ability to co-opt the scythe into a collective feminist movement.

Although the scythe is a less explicitly penetrative weapon, it does possess a modified spear or stake at the handle-end, making it a multipurpose weapon capable of slashing as well as piercing. This slayer weapon retains its exclusivity to the Slayer even when it is lost to the world. In the final season the big bad unearths the weapon not to use it himself, but as a temptation for the Slayer to come retrieve, so that he can trap and exterminate her. We can read the scene in which Buffy's crew of Potentials (potential

slayers) go to retrieve the scythe as a failure of the trial of the sword in the stone, in which Faith as the alternate Slayer demonstrates her inability to lead and her lack of destined "chosenness" in comparison to Buffy herself. Despite this, the series still asks audiences to view Buffy as the One True Slayer; it is not called Faith the Vampire Slayer or Kendra the Vampire Slayer. Though the audience meets and develops empathy for these characters, it is Buffy we are intended to support.

The series marks this distinction between Buffy and Faith through the scythe retrieval. Faith's failure to obtain it and the casualties of her rash attempt to do so reinforce our support for and recognition of Buffy as the true Slayer and the rightful leader of the Potentials and the Scooby gang. This threat to Buffy's legitimacy occurs in the final season but is undermined by the end result of making all Potentials into Slayers in the aforementioned magical action by Willow using the Slayer scythe. Thus, Buffy's legitimacy as *the* Slayer shifts into her being simply *a* Slayer among several, and later, among countless. The series thus closes with a crowdsourcing of heroism, welcoming all women into the slayer fold.

In the series finale, "Chosen," Buffy and Willow finally decide how to use the Slayer Scythe to once and for all circumvent the male heroic paradigm in which they have thus far participated. In an empowering speech to the Scooby gang and the remaining Potentials, Buffy says:

> "So here's the part where you make a choice. What if you could have that power, now? In every generation, one Slayer is born, because a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago made up that rule. They were powerful men. This woman [Willow]... is more powerful than all of them combined. So I say we change the rule. I say my power... should be *our* power. Tomorrow, Willow will use the essence of the Scythe to change our destiny. From now on, every girl in the world who might be a Slayer, will be a Slayer. Every girl who could have the power,

> will have the power; can stand up, will stand up. Slayers... every one of us. Make your choice. Are you ready to be strong?"[29]

In "Chosen," the series performs this callback to its opening lines about there being one girl in all the world, chosen, in juxtaposition to the magical act of Willow making Slayers of many girls. Willow uses the scythe to make every single girl in the world, all Potentials, into actual Slayers. Because the scythe is a symbol of the patriarchal control over women's lives and destinies hearkening back to when the Watchers made the First Slayer, it is fitting that Willow in her feminine goddess form uses this to remove men from the equation altogether. She makes all young women into Slayers, fundamentally changing the world's balance of power.

Buffy has, since its first episode, reiterated that the Slayer is the "one girl in all the world, Chosen, born with the strength and skill to fight vampires, demons, and forces of darkness." This "one girl in all the world" condition is, in essence, an indicator of female exceptionalism. That this single young woman, under the tutelage and control of an older British man, is allowed to be powerful, is the condition under which is maintains her abilities. When she does not conform, she is cast out, jailed, or disposed of so another can take her place.

Buffy and Willow's usage of the slayer scythe in the series finale is thus a direct action to address this injustice; that all women who could be powerful, will be powerful. They will outnumber the remaining Watchers, and they will be more independent, freer than previous Slayers have ever been. They will be more capable of fighting said forces of darkness in large numbers as well. While *Buffy* is ostensibly feminist from the start,

[29] Whedon, Joss. "Chosen," *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, May 20 2003.

only at its end does it attempt to break free of the constraints its creator imposes upon it. Once Whedon allows the slayers to free themselves from the bindings of the masculine paradigm of their origin, the series too achieves some sort of radical feminism. This is all accomplishable with the use of the scythe, which though it does fit into the neomedieval weapon paradigm, is used quite differently in the hands of the women of *Buffy* than one might expect.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer nevertheless falls into the trap of fetishizing the woman warrior even as it empowers her, and this is nowhere more visible than in the series' uses of phallic weapons as signifiers. In the final episode, Willow's actions of co-opting the male creation of and control over the Slayer into a crowdsourced heroic ability gestures at the possible growth of this concept, and yet, it occurs in the final episode, disallowing audiences to envision what this female-empowered world would look like. While *Buffy* seasons 8 and 9 comics and *Angel* [30]season 5 gesture towards the continuation of this concept, audiences of *Buffy* proper are denied fulfillment of this idea. Audiences reflecting on the series more than two decades later must contend with Joss Whedon's "feminist" auteur status crumbling in the face of public outcry against his abuses of power. We can certainly condemn Whedon's hypocrisy, but we could also unearth an empowering model for our own processes of pursuing feminist collectivism, even if better late than never.

[30] *Angel*, sometimes stylized *Angel: the Series*, is a spinoff of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* focusing on titular vampire-with-a-soul and Buffy's erstwhile love interest Angel/Angelus. When David Boreanaz (Angel) left *Buffy* at the end of season 3, a concurrent *Buffy/Angel* air schedule began, with crossover episodes occurring between the two shows, which aired until *Buffy* ended with season 7 in 2003, while *Angel* continued through its fifth and final season in 2004. Therefore, *Buffy* season 4 corresponds with *Angel* season 1, and so on, with the shows referencing and occasionally featuring shared characters and events.

Animating Heroism: Queer Possibilities and Radical Futures

Adventure Time is an example of televisual fantasy where the absurdist, fantastic, and imaginative visuals offer a playfully queer vision of heroism, personhood, and identity (both personal and familial). Though *Adventure Time* stops short of explicit cultural critique, its disruptive and transformative representations of Finn's multiple heroic personae invite the viewer to contemplate the "fixed" nature of cultural norms in our own society. Furthermore, it problematizes the concept of lineage as a heroic quality, reframing Finn the Human's "family" and its associated agentic and authorizing qualities for neomedieval weapons. *Adventure Time* ultimately presents a queer (non-binaristic, destabilizing) approach toward heroism, disrupting the viewer's understanding of the world, the characters, and all that they represent through the narrative's diegesis. We can see similar attempts to queer heroism on other animated series like *Steven Universe* and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, especially given their characterization as television for children.

Adventure Time is a Cartoon Network animated series that ran from 2010-2018, created by Pendleton Ward. The general premise of the series follows Finn the Human, a young boy of 13 at the start of the series, accompanied by his "brother" Jake the Dog, as they help out and go on adventures around Ooo, especially in the Candy Kingdom ruled by Finn's crush, Princess Bubblegum. They meet various deuteragonists such as the Ice King and Marceline the Vampire Queen. Although not immediately obvious, Ooo is actually a post-nuclear war Earth.[31] This post-apocalyptic future gestures towards the

[31] *Adventure Time* regularly employs neomedieval narrative tropes and conventions, especially related to questing, courtly love, and chivalry. Finn and Jake consider themselves heroic, and the world of Ooo is such that weapons like swords and bows and axes are not out of place. There are supernatural creatures,

necessity for radical change to shift cultural norms away from current hegemonic ideals. *Adventure Time's* aesthetic is neomedieval and fantastical, with vaguely old-timey imagery, and employs a heroic sensibility and chivalric ethos that drive the main protagonists, whose episodic adventures are truly more like the *aventures* of medieval romance than a "monster of the week" type of narrative structure seen in most live-action supernatural dramas.

The series plays frequently with concepts of gender, identity, and animacy, inventively destabilizing the protagonists' identities. A recurring gender-swapped version of the protagonist duo, Fionna the Human and Cake the Cat, presents an alternative fiction of *Adventure Time*.[32] These occasional swaps present viewers with a vision of the protagonists as gender fluid and queer in their ability to transform as the series progresses. While gender is certainly at play here, it is the concept of identity as a whole that *Adventure Time* problematizes, taking up questions of individuality, familial lineage, and the nature of heroism. Finn the Human even has an entire story arc in which his arm breaks off and becomes another character, a human/grass/sword entity named Fern, problematizing the idea of the hero Finn as a unique, concrete, *human*. Through its representations of neomedieval weapon motifs, *Adventure Time* destabilizes the heroic ideals to which we might expect its heroic protagonists to adhere, manipulating heroism just as a child might do with imaginative play. *Adventure Time* thus models how creators

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dungeons, and other dimensions, all of which make the designation of Finn as "the Human" understandable. This neomedieval world of Ooo necessitates the carriage of weapons like swords, bows, and axes, and such things are considered normal within the story world's diegesis.

[32] Fionna and Cake derive from deuteragonist Ice King's fanfiction that he writes about Finn and Jake, demonstrating fanfiction's inherently destabilizing function.

can employ neomedieval weapons conventions, at least in animated media, to disrupt hegemonic ideals altogether.

An analysis of Finn's various swords and his relationships with those weapons demonstrates how *Adventure Time* employs neomedieval narrative shorthand to convey character development of its hero-protagonist. The many swords Finn carries throughout the series reveal different elements of Finn's identity, both individual and familial.[33] Throughout this discussion, Sara Ahmed's concept of queer use evokes questions about Finn as an intended user of these weapons at all. After all, children should ideally never be weapon wielders, as I will discuss in the following chapter. In this case, however, if we superimpose over this entire discussion a lens of play, Finn-as-hero's mutability suddenly clicks – we can imagine him a child (Finn is perpetually 13, as it were) in a playground of make-believe where he is the hero.

The many swords on *Adventure Time* are significant in different ways, but none so much as the grass sword, which completely disrupts our understanding of Finn as a character, not just as a hero. The grass sword comes into the narrative because of a rupture in Finn's heroic and personal identities, and this accordingly fulfills the symbiotic function of neomedieval weapons. As I have argued elsewhere in this project, broken swords often represent two things: first, a literal externalization of a symbolic rupture in the hero themselves, and second, a catalyst for narrative progress. In this case, Finn cannot continue to wield his broken demon blood sword, nor can he effectively repair it,

[33] Finn's first sword called "the hero's sword," "the Golden Sword of Battle," or simply "Scarlet," displays the metonymic function of neomedieval weapons most effectively. It is a vehicle for diegetic recognition of Finn and his heroic qualities that is consistently visually present in the title card and thus inextricably associated with *Adventure Time*.

he must replace it with another, and this catalyzes a shift in Finn's heroic persona.[34] Finn's demon-blood sword represents his heroism and his connection to his adoptive father, and its breakage demonstrates a rupture in those areas necessitating a period of growth. Finn's adoptive father is Jake (the Dog)'s biological father, but despite raising Finn as his own, Finn's sword breaking here catalyzes a desire for his own biological lineage – his character is concerned with finding and understanding his biological father.

The grass sword, which appears through several seasons of *Adventure Time* and becomes integral (literally) to Finn's identity, demonstrates many of the functions of neomedieval weapons. These functions draw the viewer's attention to Finn and problematize his identity as an able-bodied human male hero by deconstructing each element of that persona in turn. The grass sword first appears in season 5 episode "Blade of Grass," when Finn and Jake go shopping for a sword to replace the broken demon-blood sword. They find a special sword at a discount from a shady seller in a tent rather than visiting their usual arms dealer. The seller, who is mostly hidden behind a counter in his giant magical grass shop, tempts Finn with a grass sword by suggesting that "swords like this don't come around every day." Finn's desire for the sword –and the audience's

[34] Finn acquires the demon-blood sword after completing a dungeon crawl set up by his late father to help prove his heroism. The demon blood sword is thus both an inherited and acquired-by-trial weapon, exemplifying both iterations of the agentic quality to neomedieval weapon motifs. In addition to Finn pulling this sword out of a stone and retrieving it through a trial in what we might call a rite of passage, this is also a sword that is his by lineage, which exemplifies the agentic and authorizing qualities of the neomedieval weapon in popular culture.

Once Finn acquires the demon blood sword, we can see that it is not only his by birthright, but that he has thoroughly earned it and is deserving of the heroic characterization the show and audience grant him. The demon blood sword also demonstrates the symbiotic function; though Finn wields the demon blood sword for a couple of seasons, in s05e40 "Play Date," it breaks and represents a rupture in Finn's identity as both his father's son, and as a hero. Although the blade is broken almost down to the hilt, and its magical demon blood properties entirely absent, Finn continues to wield this shoddily-repaired broken sword until Jake insists he replace it in s05e45, "Blade of Grass."

expectations surrounding the weapon – increase as we perceive the sword to be special. Furthermore, because Finn believes himself to be getting a deal (and we later learn that he only spends "three bucks" on the sword), this supports the idea that he is getting scammed by this deal that is absolutely too good to be true.

Finn's heroic identity initially increases in prowess with the addition of the grass sword. The grass sword's attunement to Finn as its wielder reinforces the importance of the relationship between neomedieval weapons and their bearers. Finn takes the sword, which immediately appears to work well in his hands, and as they leave with the new sword, the seller shouts out, "Remember, no take-backs!" which suggests the apparently innocuous sword has a more insidious quality causing Finn and Jake to need to return it. On their journey home, Finn jumps and cuts down a pizza flying towards them in midair, and Jake compliments Finn's skills, saying, "You're getting good with that sword. You were never able to do that with your other swords." This builds up the show's implication that this sword is exceptionally well-suited to Finn, and demonstrates to the audience that this sword and Finn are connected in some special way. This is fairly common among examples of heroes' first encounters with their iconic weapons.

The grass sword demonstrates the agentic function of neomedieval weapons, going beyond being perfectly suited to Finn toward actually controlling his movements. When Finn offers to cut a tag off of Jake's new pillow from the market, he makes several impossibly precise cuts to slice a design into the tag. When Jake scolds him for showing off, Finn explains, "I don't know what happened. I'll go put this away." This is the viewer's first indication that the grass sword appears to be animate and possess agency, acting on its own behalf even as Finn appears to wield it for his own purposes. Later in

the episode, Finn locks the grass sword into a weapons trunk and settles into his burrito-like sleeping bag for the night, but then has a nightmare of the grass sword taking over his entire body before he awakens to find it magically in his hand inside the sleeping bag. Just as in his dream, at this point the grass sword appears to begin to take over Finn's body, wrapping itself inextricably around Finn's wrist. It is clear that the grass sword is not just an object, but a character in its own right, acting of its own volition and unable to be controlled by Finn. The grass sword clearly has its own agency, acting separately from Finn's wishes and going against his will. It is not necessarily Finn's desire for a sword that manifests the change from the grass wrapped around his wrist to the sword shape it becomes; rather, the grass sword itself acts magically to know when it is needed. The grass sword thus exists outside of Finn's control and even acts of its own volition, instead of the more traditional and expected relationship between bearer and object. In this way, the grass sword is animate and active, choosing Finn as its bearer and making him bend to the sword's will.

As with the hero's sword in the title card, the grass sword also demonstrates the metonymic quality of neomedieval weapons, albeit much more insidiously. The grass sword initially appears to be harmless, but over time begins to meld itself to Finn's sword-arm, eventually taking over and controlling it. Without being able to set down the sword, the grass sword thus becomes the extreme embodiment of the first function I outline: the metonymic neomedieval sword. The sword is not just a figurative metaphor for Finn in this case, but also a very *literal* extension of his physical form, being inseparable from his arm. The distinction between Finn and the grass sword becomes blurry as the two become one and the same. Rather than holding and wielding the grass

sword, when not in use it is simply a blade of grass wrapped around Finn's wrist until needed. When he needs the sword, it shapes itself back into the sharp bladed weapon of its original appearance, moving between these two states as needed. The relation of Finn as wielder and grass sword as weapon becomes unstable as *Adventure Time* problematizes the distinction between the wielder and the weapon. We can also read this as a desire to control and maintain sovereignty over one's body, a concept which is most readily problematized during puberty, where adolescent bodies change without the permission or desire of their owners. A desire to control the uncontrollable (Nature, in this case, perhaps) can only result in disappointment.

The grass sword's entanglement (pun intended) with Finn manifests a metaphorical tension between Finn as Jake's adoptive brother and Finn as abandoned son of his biological father. His desire for knowledge of his biological father results in the climax of the tension between Finn and the grass sword. During s6e02 "Escape from the Citadel," Finn and Jake follow the antagonist Lich of the Citadel to another dimension where Finn's biological father, who has no recollection of his son or why he abandoned him, is trapped. Finn's father Martin attempts to flee, and in the process of trying to keep his father there, Finn's arm gets broken off in the struggle. The grass sword arm stretches to hold on to Martin as long as possible, finally snapping under the pressure and taking Finn's flesh with it in a literal manifestation of the figurative tension the series has alluded to up to this point. In trying to connect with his biological father, Finn literally splits himself apart.

The relationship between neomedieval weapons and lineage could not be more apparent here, presenting a clear callback to Finn's procurement of the demon-blood

sword and its relationship to his adoptive father. Finn's integrity as a whole being and as a heroic character is called into question, inviting audiences to consider whether the relationship between lineage and heroism is a positive one. If Finn's pursuit of his lineage causes such devastation, is it a goal to aspire to? Lineage and legacy ideals are slippery slopes to concerns ethnic and racial purity and supremacy, and *Adventure Time* seems to be arguing here that biological family is not worth sacrificing oneself for.

Adventure Time's climactic scene in "Escape from the Citadel" also creates both a literal and figurative rupture with regard to the weapon/bearer dichotomy. Literally, Finn's arm (and the grass that has overtaken it) rips from his body, separating half his sword arm and losing the grass sword in the process. Figuratively, it is in the struggle to resolve the break in his lineage (by rescuing and reuniting with his biological father) that actually causes his arm to break off. We should read this combination of literal and figurative ruptures as a further indication that swords are inherently associated with lineage and the perpetuation, recapture, or desire for it. It is entirely fitting that in losing the chance at reconnecting with his biological father, so too does Finn lose his sword and sword arm.[35] We can also read this in juxtaposition to the situation with the demon blood sword, associated with Finn's adoptive lineage. The devastation Finn feels earlier in the series when his adoptive father Joshua's demon blood sword breaks is another example

[35] While unresolved, it does also seem significant that when Finn's arm breaks off, a single flower grows in its place. Furthermore, when Finn's arm does eventually grow back, it is clear that there is grass hidden underneath his skin, that it is still tainted by the presence of the grass sword. The juxtaposition here between plants and metal, and further between objects of destruction and those of creation, seems to highlight a conflict at work in *Adventure Time*, one of absurdity and contradiction.

of swords acting as metaphorical objects imbued with much more than the capacity for violence.

Adventure Time further complicates this conflation between the weapons and heroes via the introduction of yet another significant sword on *Adventure Time*, the Finn sword. The Finn sword seems to be the culmination of many of the functions of neomedieval weapons in popular fantasy. This sword is so called because it is literally made *of Finn*, coming into being when Finn meets another version of himself, who explodes from the ensuing paradox and manifests the Finn sword. It exemplifies the authorizing, agentic, and metonymic qualities of neomedieval weapons in popular media. It is unsurprising that we see the agentic quality appearing with the Finn sword, because it is the direct transmutation of a human character into a martial object.[36] We can see Finn speaking to the Finn sword, asking it questions and treating it more like an ally than a weapon. In s8e05, "I Am A Sword," Finn demonstrates how in tune he is with the Finn sword by doing tricks with it that would be impossible with any other combination of weapon and bearer. He throws the sword up in the air, closes his eyes, turns around, etc. and each time, the Finn sword finds its way perfectly into his grip regardless. This is a parallel to Finn's initial usage of the grass sword, although in this case, the sword *is* him, rather than being perfectly suited for him.

Finn treats and refers to the Finn sword as a character rather than an object, bringing the question of animacy and agency to the forefront of this discussion. Finn calls the Finn sword "he" and calls out for it when lost as if the Finn sword can hear and

[36] This is similar to the *Harry Potter* examples from Chapter 2, where the various types of wood, cores, and flexibility of characters' wands serve as external representations of their inner qualities and stand in for their wizarding identity.

respond to him. When Jake suggests that they just find him another sword as they have done many times, Finn protests: "You don't understand! The sword is like me, like a sword me." Jake suggests that he can make a similar "sword that looks like Finn" out of the arts and crafts they have at home, not fully understanding the connection between Finn and his sword. The recreated Finn Sword appears to be a white wood plank in the shape of a blade stuck to a blue ball with a semblance of Finn's face on it attached to a handle; this facsimile is a stark contrast to the actual Finn sword, which Finn himself in sword form. This speaks to the broader conventions in heroic fantasy of the close relationship between weapon and wielder.[37]

Adventure Time reveals yet another indicator of the Finn sword's agentic quality as a neomedieval weapon when a villain, Bandit Princess, kidnaps the sword. The Finn sword identifies itself and its conditions of use to her: "Stop!…I'm Finn Merton, AKA Finn sword… You can't be using me to rob banks. Hero use only!" The conditions of use for the Finn sword demand it be only used heroically, rather than villainously. Bandit Princess is clearly not the intended user of the Finn sword and thus her appropriation of the sword is condemned within the narrative. When Bandit Princess beheads the mayor of Spiky Village, Finn sword scolds her, "You've broken my hero streak!" He then pleads psychically to human Finn, "Finn #2, if you can hear me, this gray area wet wipe is using me against my will. Please find me soon. Find me, and use me to slay this bleeble." When Finn catches up to Bandit Princess, he demands, "Give me back myself, dude!" before the grass sword emerges from Finn's arm to do battle against the Finn sword.

[37] See also Chapter 3, where I discuss the intimacy between Thor and his warhammer Mjolnir, another example where this relationship is significant to the heroic narrative being told.

In this scene, we have two anthropomorphic hero characters, Finn the Human and Bandit Princess, each bearing a sword, the grass sword and Finn sword respectively. Yet the show clearly depicts this as a battle between Finn sword and grass sword rather than their human wielders. The Finn sword warns Bandit Princess, "You [sic] gonna get it now, dude! That's the grass sword!" However, when Finn strikes with the grass sword, he accidentally stabs the gem of the Finn sword bearing Finn's face, cracking it and breaking off the tip of the grass sword in the gem, which disappears into its now empty face, indicating a kind of death or loss. Every aspect of this episode dealing with the Finn sword reinforces a human/weapon duplication of heroism, where Finn is replicated as a hero in the form of a sword just as he himself is a hero in the form of a human. These playful gestures invite the audience to consider who (and indeed, what) gets to be a hero, and suggests with the grief and loss of identity that the Finn sword's destruction is similar to the death of any human character.

This conflation between heroic human and heroic object in *Adventure Time* further appears when the broken Finn sword fuses with the grass sword to become its own entity, Fern. This makes even more explicit the connection between the hero and the weapon, in this case that the sword is an entity in and of itself, connected to but ultimately independent of Finn. In s8e13, "Reboot," when things are dire in a battle Finn has no idea how to win, the grass sword takes over and comes out of his hand without Finn's direction. He protests, "No! I'm in control," and when the grass sword doesn't obey, Finn punches his own arm and says, "Not on *my* arm!" As the grass tendrils retract finally, they run over the broken Finn sword, and wrap around that, suddenly leaving Finn's body entirely and once again leave him with only half an arm. The difference

between Finn's arm and the grass sword is entirely absent at this point, as Finn cries out, "My arm!" upon seeing the grass leaving him, before he even realizes he no longer has a forearm or hand. The grass completely encircles the Finn sword, taking the shape of a humanoid figure entirely made of grass. This entity appears to be a grassy being which wields the grass sword but contains the Finn sword.

The characterization of Finn the Human as our heroic protagonist becomes muddy with the addition of this new grassy entity, inviting us to contemplate our understanding of Finn's heroic identity within *Adventure Time's* narrative. Viewers see the grass entity take the shape of a grassy, blockier Finn, moving and speaking the same as Finn, and most integrally, believing himself to *be* Finn. The two have a humorous exchange in which they each protest that they are the true Finn Merton, and "100% hero." Jake confirms that the grassy entity is some "plant demon, probably." *Adventure Time* thus implements queer use with the grass sword not just in terms of who can and does wield it, but in how use of it also changes the wielder.

Grass Finn struggles with morality and finding his own way to be a hero, especially in the shadow of Finn the Human himself. Thus, rather than attempt to copy Finn, Grass Finn renames himself Fern the Human and decides to be the something else entirely rather than continue trying to assimilate into Finn's heroic paradigm. This, I posit, is an important move by *Adventure Time* in its larger argument (absurdly though it be presented) that heroism is an ethos we each must develop for ourselves, and that does not fit into any particular box, including who we decide to see as having agency, identity, or worth. The implications of Fern deciding for himself who—and indeed what—to be

present a paradigm shifting invitation to audiences to set aside what we know and expect in favor of whatever comes.

Adventure Time's absurdism articulated through animation is perhaps the queerest form of heroism we have, unconcerned with replicating or reifying stereotypes but instead in playing with and destabilizing them. Ahmed's concept of queer use is best implemented through imagination and play, where all use is queer use. The series finale, "Come Along With Me" demonstrates how *Adventure Time*'s self-awareness enables it to be play with temporality, heroism, and lineage. The finale's new protagonists a thousand years after the last events of *Adventure Time*, Shermy and Beth, take up the role of the viewer in being told the story of Finn and Jake as they save the world. Our new place in the future for the finale enables us to once again look back and examine that which came before, fictional though it may be. During this episode, we see the demise of Fern, whose remains (the broken Finn sword) Finn and Jake plant in the ground, becoming a giant tree upon which perches a restored Finn sword.

Adventure Time's final image is that of new characters Shermy and Beth pulling this Finn sword out from the tree and holding it aloft to glisten in the sun. This final image reiterates how over time stories become legends and their meaning becomes muddled, if not meaningless. We can read it not only as a criticism of how fidelity discourses surrounding "medieval" motifs are an exercise in futility, but also as an invitation to allow ourselves to sit in confusion and contradiction and rather than choosing to try and fix these "problems," to instead let them be. It is okay for a story to resolve with less than perfect symmetry, for a meaning to be contradictory, for a character to be one thing and also another. It is not only acceptable for heroes to be

different from each other, but necessary. *Adventure Time* has many lessons to share, all of them wrapped up in a precise feeling that is very hard to describe – that nostalgia we have, seeking a lineage we have lost, a community we are not a part of, a world that seems unattainable. Through *Adventure Time*, which better than any other neomedieval text exemplifies the *aventures* of the medieval characters' adventures, we can find a way to play with the past and the present that does not necessarily reconcile them, but allow them to coexist in contradiction.

It's clear there are still miles to go in live-action televisual narratives in divesting from binarism; in many ways, it is unsurprising to find the most queer, destabilizing, playful modes of heroism in animation. Children are encouraged to play and test things out, to learn by doing, to sit in the discomfort of not knowing. Narratives for children and adolescents are also fundamentally concerned with identity formation and development, making them particularly apt spaces to explore aspects of identity such as heroism and its associated values. Investment in identity formation – especially in relation to a parental or familial figure – is coded here in the narrative through the use of the many swords of *Adventure Time*. Althusser's concept of interpellation applies here as a way we can understand the invitations to individuals (be they sword or human) and communities to accept and internalize certain identities and values, and which the aforementioned examples each in their ways problematize. Fixed though it might seem when considering a single hero in a single moment, heroism is *anything* but concrete, offering plentiful fodder for exploration and play in fiction like *Adventure Time*, which invites viewers to join them on the journey.

III. FROM OBJECT-ORIENTATION TO INNER POWER: RHETORICAL WEAPONS AND NARRATIVE OBJECTS IN CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT FANTASY FICTION

Neomedieval weapons are powerful symbolic objects in heroic narratives that assist in demonstrating character development and identity formation, two elements that are particularly salient in children's and young adult literature. In the *bildungsroman* genre of literary fiction, for example, narratives focus on the coming-of-age journey and often culminate in the protagonist settling on an identity as they enter adulthood. Though not all children's and young adult literary texts may be characterized as examples of the *bildungsroman*, most *do* take up identity formation and character development as central tenets of the narrative, implicitly or explicitly, and are thus well-suited as symbols and signifiers of these journeys. Furthermore, the nature of children's and young adult literature is by default didactic, serving to posit a moral exemplar for the young and impressionable to adopt.

For these reasons, children's and young adult literature is one of the easiest media groupings in which to find signifiers of heroic ideals, as they are often made explicit to serve as role models for their readers. Although swords are well-established in fantasy generally as symbolic markers of heroism, Judith Kellogg further identifies the significance of swords within children's and young adult literature as "key emblems … of empowerment at many levels—political, personal, physical, magical, and mythic—and therefore appropriate narrative focal points for examining the transmission of cultural values and their relationship to shaping personal identity" (52). Literature for children often reflects most clearly the anxieties and ideals of the culture that produces it, and given the breadth of narrative potential of neomedieval weapons and the loaded nature of

their significance, swords readily serve as discursive sites of those cultural ideals and anxieties.

As instruments of nascent heroism and identity formation in neomedieval children's fantasy, weapons are also queer objects that straddle the constructed distinction between child and adult. Since both medievalism and childhood studies take up questions of nostalgia and temporality, I want to further consider swords as queer objects that travel from medieval to modern, creating an imagined place/time where these collisions occur. Carolyn Dinshaw addresses this temporal relationship as *asynchrony*, arguing that "time itself is wondrous, marvelous, full of queer potential" (4). The manipulation of sword conventions enables creators to meaningfully engage with newer ideologies like feminism and to destabilize and even queer cultural norms through these asynchronous objects. In *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use*, queer theorist Sara Ahmed makes an argument about the conditions for the use of objects, what we would call "instructions." Ahmed deconstructs the way objects communicate the conditions of their use such as when, how, or who can use something (28). Ahmed defines "queer use" as when things are used by someone or for something not intended or set forth by their instructions.

Children, we might agree, are not the standard users of swords, and so by virtue of using them in children's literature, swords become queer objects that mediate the conflicting time-spaces in which they appear. Children's play is one way of marking unexpected or unusual modes of interacting with objects, be they toys or weapons, as *the* model of queer use. Of course, in what we term "high" fantasy where the narrative setting is often a neomedieval simulacrum of our world, swords are not as out of place as they are in, say, Brooklyn. But even in high fantasy, weapon-wielders are not conventionally

children, making their use at the very least unusual and thus narratively significant. In urban fantasy examples, as we'll discuss, the mimesis of a recognizable real world further defamiliarizes the hero-protagonists' use of weapons, enabling us to decode the interpretive significance of these out-of-place objects.

In this chapter, I will use a combined framework of queer theory, neomedievalism, and narrative theory of children's and young adult literature. Using this multidisciplinary approach, I argue that weapons in children's and young adult fantasy initially function as powerful signifiers of cultural anxieties and ideals that are ultimately sacrificed or set aside to empower the hero-protagonist without reliance on an external object. This shift from external authorization and identity formation via a powerful object to internal self-reliance and empowerment often occurs in the *bildungsroman* and/or its subcategory the *Kunstlerroman.* This pattern is characteristic of neomedieval children's and young adult fantasy regardless of its sub-categorization within that genre as high or urban.

Because the distinctions between high and urban fantasy demonstrate clear patterns of narrative structure and worldbuilding, it is most prudent to discuss their usage of neomedieval sword motifs within those two distinct categories. I will first address high fantasy, also often called medieval fantasy, for its obvious if not faithful inspiration by pre-modernity. As I have mentioned throughout the project so far, I am uninterested in fidelity discourses, and as such will not be comparing these fantasy worlds to their ostensibly medieval inspirations. Rather, it is productive to note how each example distinctly offers a way to employ swords for particular narrative agenda.

In children's and young adult fantasy of the high or neomedieval subgenre, especially examples coming out of the 2nd wave of feminism during the latter half of the 20th century, the conflict between neomedievalism and feminism is a prominent concern explored through these fictional texts. For this reason, the included example texts address this relationship and the tensions involved in the conflict between the phallocentrism of conservative neomedievalism and the increasing desire for female characters to have their day as heroes in fantasy literature. While this chapter will address in depth only Tamora Pierce's *Song of the Lioness* quartet, examples of neomedieval swords in children's literature include Patricia C. Wrede's *Enchanted Forest Chronicles*, Robin McKinley's *The Hero and the Crown* and *The Blue Sword*, C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* and Lloyd Alexander's *Chronicles of Prydain*, among many others. In my discussion of *Song of the Lioness*, I will demonstrate how the quartet's structure reinforces this object-orientation to inner power transition model that I argue in this chapter is characteristic of many object-focused children's and young adult literary examples. Additionally, I will show how Pierce's series explores the tension created by binaristic thinking (medieval/modern, male/female) to queer heroism and reject female exceptionalism in favor of feminist community action.

The subgenre "urban" fantasy is a low or more mimetic categorization within fantasy that at least partially takes place in our own world or a world so similar to our own as to be indistinguishable. In this section, I will demonstrate how this additional mimesis offers heightened stakes for the application of the heroic ideals identified within the narratives. In this section, I will focus on the *Harry Potter* series, but want to identify that many of these elements can be found elsewhere in children's urban fantasy, notably

in Cassandra Clare's *Mortal Instruments* and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, among others.. As my main argument in this chapter surrounds the shift from this reliance on external objects as empowering nascent heroism toward recognition and development of inner power, it should be clear how Pierce and Rowling's series shift from object-orientation to investigation of the self as hero.

Neomedievalism, Feminism, and the Sword in Tamora Pierce's *Song of the Lioness*

Tamora Pierce's *Song of the Lioness*[38] is an example of young adult fantasy using swords to mediate the ostensibly incompatible concepts of medievalism and feminism. Alanna is a queer user of swords not just because she is a child—starting at age 11 in *Alanna: The First Adventure*—but also more importantly because she is female. Clare Bradford draws attention to the use of medievalism in children's and young adult literature as "a version of the Middle Ages which offers immunity from the unstable ground of puberty and female sexuality,"[39] but *Song of the Lioness* instead embraces these issues, focusing gender and sexuality at the crux of its neomedieval narrative. Alanna's menstruation and puberty are major conflicts contributing to her internalized misogyny throughout *Alanna: The First Adventure* and *In the Hand of the Goddess*.

In this section I argue that these significant gendered moments function symbiotically with Alanna's development as a hero, connecting the status of Alanna's

[38] Tamora Pierce's *Song of the Lioness* quartet, a young adult fantasy series from the 1980s set in a neomedieval fantasy world inspired by high medieval aesthetics, feudal Europe, and the literary construct of the chivalric knight. It follows Alanna as she disguises herself as a boy in order to train as a page, squire, and finally become a knight and go on adventures. Alanna seems to be motivated by choice and freedom, two tenets of second wave feminism that play out heavily in this series.

[39] Bradford, Clare. *The Middle Ages in Children's Literature*, 181.

gender identity with the status of her knighthood. Her sword Lightning's integrity, breakage, and repair signify different stages in Alanna's gender and heroic identity formation, both of which must be resolved to ensure the narrative closure of the series. While these same weapon motifs can catalyze arguments about issues running the gamut—able-bodiedness, ethnic and racial supremacy, and toxic masculinity—Pierce's narrative framing of swords puts feminism in direct conversation with phallocentric medievalism as its central conflict.

The Woman Who Rides Like a Man (the third book in the series) reflects even in its title the gendered anxieties surrounding Alanna that serve as the narrative's ostensible conflict. This book in particular interrogates the characterization of Alanna as "like a man" because she dares to not ride sidesaddle, because she bears weapons, and because she aspires to privileges restricted to men. The Bedouin-like Bazhir tribe leader who gives her this title has a vested interest in maintaining traditional boundaries between male and female gender performance and expectations, and that he gives her this eponym demonstrates the series' central slippage concerning how to categorize Alanna as somewhere between woman and man. Also at stake in these conversations is the value of qualities traditionally ascribed to men, revealed when this same tribal leader, Ali Mukhtab, asks her: "Have you not discovered that when people, men and women, find a woman who acts intelligently, they say she acts like a man?"[40] This quote not only frames intelligence as a male quality, but also indicates that women are complicit in this misogynist ideology.

[40] Pierce, Tamora. *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man,* 43.

Alanna is indeed not overly concerned with how her actions affect other women, nor does she strive to make things more egalitarian for the sake of gender equality. Her participation in and endorsement of knighthood as a male institution instead make her complicit in the continued exclusion of women from it. Given that it has been nearly a century since the last woman was allowed to pursue knighthood, Alanna has every reason to fear the institution discovering her to be female, and her suppression of her female embodiment is for the sake of this pursuit. She seeks to circumvent the rules of her society rather than to change herself or revise them so other women can also benefit. The internalized misogyny she feels resulting from her exclusion from traditionally male occupations/status causes her to reject her femininity in ways that appear almost like gender dysphoria. This additionally creates the trap of female exceptionalism to which many heroines fall prey, Alanna included.

The female exceptionalism that Jane Tolmie, Jes Battis, and Sarah Sahn have critiqued Pierce for embracing in *Song of the Lioness* stems from these exact individual motivations rather than collectivist feminism. Tolmie's "Medievalism and the Fantasy Heroine" explains how in this convention of female-authored fantasy, "patriarchy itself serves as the female adventure and oppressive gender-based structures consistently provide the external criteria that define extraordinary women."[41] Knighthood is the "oppressive gender-based structure" that allows Alanna to demonstrate her exceptionalism by assimilating into a patriarchal paradigm, and is superficially the conflict of the series. Throughout this article, I argue that Alanna's fundamental obstacle

[41] Tolmie, Jane. "Medievalism and the Fantasy Heroine," 155.

throughout the quartet is *not* the exclusionary institution of knighthood, but rather her own internalized misogyny, and that the juxtaposition of Alanna's journey towards knighthood with her private gender trouble presents a unique opportunity to mediate these conflicting ideologies. Sahn's "Decolonizing Childhood: Coming of Age in Tamora Pierce's Fantastic Empire" also compellingly argues that

> while Alanna breaks down the barriers that would keep her from her vocation as a knight, she does so for herself, not for anyone else. Ultimately, Alanna's transgressions only prove her exceptionalism, reinforcing the masculinism of the institution of knighthood and of Tortall's gendered structures and norms more generally.[42]

Although these critiques have clear merits, I propose we read the closure of the series as making knighthood more inclusive while simultaneously destabilizing its authority as a patriarchal institution. While the majority of the series focuses on Alanna's selfish desire to become a knight rather than dismantling the barriers that would prevent *all* young women from participating, the conclusion of its final entry, *Lioness Rampant*, creates a rupture in the authority of the institution itself.

Recuperating the figure of the martial heroine in *Song of the Lioness* necessitates Alanna's recognition of her own femininity as compatible with heroism and knighthood. The early books of the series focus on Alanna's rejection of her femininity, especially in the moments of crises when she enters puberty. By binding her breasts, hiding her menstruation, and participating in the heteronormative ethos of her knighthood training, Alanna actively rejects femininity to perform an outward male heroic persona. When Alanna is very young and before these developments occur, the text emphasizes that there

[42] Sahn, Sarah. "Decolonizing Childhood," 147.

is virtually no distinction between Alanna and her twin brother Thom, nor is there any challenge beyond the sexist principle of female exclusion preventing Alanna's participation in the institution of knighthood.

Jes Battis poses an intriguing question of the series that demands consideration here: "*is* Alanna a boy? Furthermore, how does one 'be' a boy or a girl in children's fantasy literature?"[43] Alanna passes as male "Alan" easily by cutting her long red hair and dressing in breeches and tunics, enabling the audience and the series' characters to read Alanna as a boy. I interpret the internalized misogyny Alanna feels as she develops secondary sex characteristics as stemming from her desire to be a knight, not an inherent discontent with her gender. Though *Song of the Lioness* does not explicitly articulate Alanna feeling that she *is a boy,* there is still plenty of room here for trans and genderqueer readings of Alanna.

For the purposes of this argument, Alanna's internalized misogyny is a consequence of her desire to participate in a male-exclusive institution, not an innate belief that she is male. Given this, I interpret the series as establishing Alanna's femininity as an obstacle not to overcome but to accept; only by accepting her femininity as a quality of her heroism and not a barrier to it can the narrative achieve its goals. It's important to interpret this not as a product of the current 21st century focus on micro-labels or progressive gender politics more generally, but rather as coming out of the 1980s new age goddess feminism on which Pierce relies for much of Alanna's characterization and heroic journey. That is not to rule out trans- and non-binary inclusive

[43] Battis, Jes, "Transgendered Magic: The Radical Performance of the Young Wizard in YA Literature," in *The Looking Glass*, Vol 10, Issue 1: 2006.

readings of Alanna, but instead to focus on the idea of femininity being anathema to strength and valor. For example, when Alanna develops breasts, her mentor Coram tries to convince her it does not prevent her from being heroic:

> Alanna stepped from behind the screen. Her eyes were red and swollen. If she had been crying, Coram knew better than to mention it. "Maybe I was born that way, but I don't have to put up with it!"
>
> He looked at her with alarm. "Lass, ye've got to accept who ye are," he protested. "Ye can be a woman and still be a warrior."
>
> "I hate it!" she yelled, losing her temper.[44]

Similarly, when Alanna begins to menstruate, she panics and refuses to accept her new status as a woman of child-bearing age:

> "How long do I have to put up with this?" Alanna gritted.
>
> "Until you are too old to bear children. It's as normal as the full moon is, and it happens just as often. You may as well get used to it."
>
> "No!" Alanna cried, jumping to her feet. "I won't let it."
>
> Again Mistress Cooper raised her eyebrows. "You're a female, child, no matter what clothing you wear. You must become accustomed to that."[45]

These events in *Alanna: The First Adventure* present obstacles to Alanna's goal of successfully attaining her knighthood because they make her cross-dressing more difficult.

Victoria Flanagan has argued that Alanna's deception enables her, "a feminine subject, to gain unprecedented access to masculine spaces and masculine privilege."[46] Alanna's rejection of her cis-female physical embodiment appears in tandem with her performance of maleness, emphasizing that Alanna has "internalized the attributes and

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[44] Pierce, Tamora. *Alanna: The First Adventure*, 106.

[45] Pierce, *Alanna*, 136-7.

[46] Flanagan, Victoria. *Into the Closet*, 24.

behaviors associated with masculinity" to the point of a male habitus.[47] This is all in the service of the argument Pierce makes throughout the series that women can be warriors without adhering to masculine ideals, and that embracing femininity is not mutually exclusive to being a martial hero. Alanna's sword Lightning is the vehicle by which Pierce's feminist moves work in tandem with her narrative's heroic journey to dismantle the association between neomedieval heroism and masculinity.

From the moment Alanna acquires Lightning in *Alanna: The First Adventure*, Pierce's narrative clearly identifies the sword as being for Alanna alone. Lightning interpellates Alanna; the two recognize and validate one another and operate symbiotically. The sword authorizes Alanna's training to be a knight despite her cross-dressing deception, and from within the institution's sexist worldview, supports the idea that women too can be heroes. Pierce employs neomedievalism to enforce a reading of the sword as integral to this authorizing institutional body. Lightning offers Alanna (and the reader, through her) a way to assimilate to this neomedieval heroic system, whereas the sword's sub-narrative demonstrates a desire to disrupt and discard this institutionally authorized form of heroism. Jane Tolmie argues that this is conventional to female-authored fantasy, where

> feminist disapproval within fantasy novels is the encouragement of a form of reader satisfaction that denies complicity in oppressive structures while still relying on such structures to provide meaning. It becomes possible to disapprove while still, at some profound level, approving and feeling pleasure. Feminist critique is just one side of the coin that purchases reader pleasure – and just one side of the coin that purchases a particular kind of female participation in the realm of fantasy.[48]

[47] Flanagan, 29.
[48] Tolmie, 156.

Given that *Song of the Lioness* emerges from the second wave of feminism and responds directly to the lack of fantasy heroines in popular culture, it is unsurprising that it retains some forms of adherence to exclusively male models of heroism. Other elements of Pierce's series like the Great Mother Goddess, the ember stone necklace, and even the crystal sword show how much it embodies the New Age feminism characteristic of the time. Nevertheless, that Alanna both becomes complicit in and also defies the authority of the oppressive institution of knighthood presents an interpretive challenge to the discerning young reader, while the series' conclusion attempts to set female exceptionalism aside.

Alanna acquires her sword in a way that resonates with medieval conventions surrounding sword acquisition via destiny, fate, or a similarly mystical divine force. This serves both to authorize her as heroic in the diegesis of the series and to reinforce the reader's sympathy for her as a character. Heroic swords are not conventionally a matter of trial and error—those who are able to obtain such weapons do not usually attempt and fail, but rather succeed instantly and easily, simply because they, unlike all others, are meant to succeed. Medieval texts sometimes explicitly offer "conditions of use" marking swords as authorizing and legitimating forces via the public reception of their removal.

The use of this motif as an interpellation and authorization of the wielder is quite clear: protagonists who are able to obtain such swords are noble, heroic, and male—always knightly, sometimes kingly. Their weapons actively choose to acknowledge the wielders they allow to acquire them, and in doing so, enable the protagonists to complete feats of heroism. In comparison, medieval (and, by extension, neomedieval) female characters are most often pushed to the sidelines as caregivers or those in need of care,

not the protagonists of the narratives in which they appear. In the case of *Song of the Lioness*, Alanna does get to be the hero of her own story, and Lightning specifically chooses Alanna with full knowledge of her femaleness.

Public recognition of a sword's removal is integral to its function as an authorizing force, as a private retrieval of a difficult or impossible-to-obtain sword does not publicly demonstrate the failure of others nor the uniqueness of the hero who succeeds. It requires acknowledgement by others to validate the heroic nature of the trial and to reify its socio-political consequences within the narrative. *Alanna: The First Adventure* employs this trope between Alanna and her mentor Sir Myles, who knows her as Alan. Alanna visits Myles's estate and feels called directly to the location of the sword; she immediately discovers the armory, in which there is a stone door leading underground. Upon entering, she hears a "strangeness" that "called her with a high, singing voice she couldn't have ignored even if she wanted to."[49] Within this tunnel, Alanna finds the sword: "[Alanna] picked up something that glittered beautifully. It was a crystal, attached to the hilt of a sword. Long and light, the blade was encased in a battered dark sheath. Alanna's hand trembled as she lifted it."[50] When all the air goes out of the tunnel and Alanna begins to suffocate, it is only by accepting death that she is able to pass the test that makes the sword accept her.

The public acknowledgment of Alanna's trial and newfound sword identifies her within the text's world as being worthy of such a powerful, special weapon. Alanna's refusal to accept that she is special stems from her own imposter syndrome and guilt

[49] Pierce, *Alanna*, 152.

[50] 151.

about her gender deception, but Myles makes it perfectly clear that in his eyes, there is no other way to interpret the situation. He insists: "You haven't been paying attention. I was compelled to bring you here. You opened the passage when I've tried to do it for years, and failed. Something happened down there, and the sword protected you. And don't forget the storm."[51] Even Alanna must admit he is right when she draws the sword for the first time:

> The hilt fit her hand as if made for her…Alanna hefted the blade. It was thinner than a broadsword, and lighter, with a broadsword's double edge. The metal was lightweight, with a silver sheen. She lightly touched a thumb to one edge and cut herself. Grinning with delight, she tried a few passes. It felt wonderful in her hand.[52]

This passage serves to demonstrate to the reader that Lightning and Alanna are meant for each other. That the sword fits her hand perfectly reinforces the destined quality of Alanna's discovery and acquisition of this particular sword. Just as neomedieval weapons dictate the conditions of their use, they also dictate who *cannot* use them. Pierce reinforces that Lightning is meant for—and only for—Alanna when others try their magic on the sword, and it either ignores or violently rejects them, depending on their relationship to Alanna. For example, Duke Roger, who later serves as the primary antagonist, has a violent reaction when he attempts to hold Lightning. These all serve to establish that this sword, and Alanna's retrieval of it, are unique and special, authorizing her as heroic publicly and privately.

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[51] 156.

[52] 156-7.

In the second book, *In the Hand of the Goddess*, Pierce complicates Alanna's heroic identity by offering an additional authorizing force, the Great Mother Goddess. When Alanna rejects the idea of her own importance, even to the goddess herself, the Great Mother Goddess insists that she is "one of her Chosen,"[53] giving Alanna an ember stone necklace to signify her connection to the Goddess. This divine authorization stands in opposition to the institution of knighthood, which only authorizes Alanna so long as it believes her to be Alan. Accordingly, Sahn critiques Alanna's drive to participate in knighthood as incomplete, given that "as an ideal embodied in (masculine) knighthood, Alanna can never fully claim chivalry as her own—both because of the deception she carries out to gain access to the institution, and because of the body that necessitates that deception."[54] While knighthood may never fully accept her, the divine force of the Great Mother Goddess, which is arguably more significant, *does* accept her. With the institution of knighthood as well as the goddess interpellating her, Alanna gains much more legitimacy for the reader despite the former's conditions for acceptance. Alanna's private status as a deity's avatar makes her a divinely legitimized heroine independent of any recognition by the male institution of knighthood.

Whereas Alanna's assimilation into the patriarchal institution of knighthood authorizes her only because it presumes her to be male, and the Great Mother Goddess (a feminine deity who calls Alanna her "chosen") *privately* authorizes her as female, Lightning serves to publicly validate both aspects of Alanna. By choosing her and working only for her, Lightning authorizes Alanna, validating Alanna-as-heroine, not

[53] Pierce, Tamora. *In the Hand of the Goddess*, 9.

[54] Sahn, 154.

ignorant of her femininity but in full support and recognition of it. Privately, mystically, Lightning accepts and acknowledges Alanna, while also publicly enabling her to participate in the patriarchal system of knighthood because the sword functions as a visible marker of heroism.

Lightning thus supports her public heroic identity as Alan, but the mystical circumstances under which Alanna acquires it also reinforce her relationship with the sword as destined and connect to her divine authorization. Lightning thus serves as a mediator between Alanna's public and private identities, legitimizing both the public (male, Alan) and the private (female, Alanna) personae as heroic and special. Sahn's argument about Alanna's inability to wholly claim chivalry fails to consider all authorizing forces the series offers, of which knighthood is only one. The sword's queer in-betweenness allows Lightning to be a fluid representation of Alanna's heroism, operating within and also outside both of these authorizing forces and enabling her to move among them.

By the end of *In the Hand of the Goddess*, Alanna has earned her knighthood in disguise as Alan, but continues to reject most aspects of her femininity. As Tolmie, Battis, and Sahn have previously discussed, Pierce does this in ways that maintain whiteness and heteronormativity, with Alanna engaging in several romantic relationships and playing with the idea of traditional femininity at times. During the climactic battle with the series' main antagonist, Duke Roger, he accidentally cuts through Alanna's corset, unbinding her breasts and revealing her gender deception to the entire public, including the king who has just granted her knighthood. Alanna is victorious and kills Duke Roger, but the damage of publicly revealing her gender remains problematic.

This rupture in Alanna's public/private identities creates a moment of transition, a hesitation on the part of both Alanna and the reader. For Alanna, this means exile while the men in power decide whether she can keep her shield. This catalyzing event opens up the possibility for Alanna to both be a knight and female. There is no longer a reason beyond Alanna's own internalized misogyny to maintain a male gender performance, and thus she begins living openly as a woman. With Alanna now a knight but also openly performing femininity, the series problematizes the ostensible mutual exclusivity of woman | warrior through a literal and figurative rupture of the very thing that has served to validate both these aspects of her identity: Alanna's sword breaks.

It is precisely swords' emblematic status in patriarchal institutions such as Tortall's knighthood that enables Alanna's sword Lightning to also disrupt this institution. Michael J. Brisbois's "The Blade Against the Burden: The Iconography of the Sword in the *Lord of the Rings"* has made such an argument about the use of neomedieval weapons in Tolkien's works:

> Swords, used responsibly, allow those without power to gain access to respect in cultures which marginalize them (be it on grounds of race, like the hobbits, or gender, as in the case of Eowyn). These characters do not use their swords as tools against their own cultures, but use them as signs of their service, proving their worth in execution of their duties.[55]

Unlike in *The Lord of the Rings*, swords in Pierce's *Song of the Lioness* are—pardon the pun—double-edged, objects able to be both tools of institutional oppression as well as instruments of rebellion and reclamation.

[55] Brisbois, Michael J. "The Blade Against the Burden: The Iconography of the Sword in the *Lord of the Rings*," 94.

For Alanna, her sword allows her to lay claim to authority and recognition otherwise inaccessible to her, working *within* the oppressive institution of knighthood, albeit selfishly, and disrupting its authority and legitimacy by virtue of her inclusion in it. Furthermore, swords disrupt the exclusionary institutional ideals upon which the earlier books—and Alanna herself—rely, offering the narrative closure of the series as a recuperative move that extends beyond masculine models of heroism.

Tamora Pierce's latter two books, *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* and *Lioness Rampant,* employ intact/fragmented/discarded embodiments of the sword Lightning to represent the dynamic integration of Alanna's femininity into her heroic identity. Such breakages often suggest a rupture between what the weapon itself represents and the heroic journey of its wielder. In Pierce's case, Lightning is not only a metonym of Alanna's individual heroism, but also a representation of the phallocentric institution of knighthood in which her female participation is problematic. The integrity of the sword Lightning juxtaposed with Alanna's growing acceptance of her femininity enables a recuperative mode of female heroism that displaces the neomedieval phallocentric ideal.

When Lightning breaks at the beginning of the third book in this series, *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man*, the association between Alanna's gender identity/performance and heroic institutional participation ruptures. The outward manifestation of this internal tension is the literal fragmentation of the sword, as the representation of Alanna herself:

> [Alanna] brought Lightning up hard, slimming her blade hilt-to-hilt with the giant's sword. There was a ring of clashing metal, and the downward sweep of the crystal edge was stopped. Then Lightning broke, sheared off near the hilt.[56]

[56] Pierce, *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man*, 4-5.

In this scene, Alanna's heretofore undefeated sword Lightning breaks in battle against a hillman wielding a crystal sword; Pierce's text does not mark this enemy as particularly significant, but *does* demonstrate the importance of the weapon that shatters Lightning. Neither Alanna nor the reader know at this point that the crystal sword that breaks Lightning is an evil weapon forged by Duke Roger and imbued with his magic. That Lightning is destroyed by a weapon crafted by Duke Roger offers readers a sort of delayed consequence to the battle in which Alanna kills Roger at the end of *In the Hand of the Goddess*. It is as though Roger's evil and misogyny transcend the grave to punish her in this moment, inadvertently removing from Alanna's arsenal the most iconic element of her heroic identity.

This scene places the validity of Alanna's victory as well as the retention of her knightly shield and title into question, for the first time in the series asking whether Alanna is still a hero without Lightning. It links, rather explicitly, the revelation of Alanna's femininity with the destruction of her public heroic identity, inviting significant character development in order to progress. If the reader were not already aware of this direct connection between Alanna's heroism and the integrity of her sword Lightning, Pierce makes it explicit following the sword's breakage in *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* via Alanna's internal commentary: "Lightning had been her sword ever since she had been considered fit to carry one. How could she fight without it in her hand?"[57] In other words, when Lightning breaks, Alanna's public heroic identity also fractures.

[57] Pierce, *Woman*, 5.

Lightning breaking puts Alanna at a disadvantage not only because she no longer has a weapon, but also because its loss undermines her confidence and signifies a weakness in her heroic identity. In Pierce's case, although Alanna-as-Alan is deemed "fit to carry" a sword during knighthood training, the reader's awareness of Alanna as a woman makes her *unfit* to wield one by virtue of her sex, according to the patriarchal institutional conditions of the series. Ahmed's language about the uses of use prove, well, useful: "A breakage can also be a transition moment: why something is taken out of use; how it is taken out of use… A breakage might be that transformation of a quality of a thing while being experienced as a change in a relation."[58]

Sahn also argues that "to become unused can mean to unbecome,"[59] and this serves as a transitional moment for Alanna: it is a moment of unbecoming a man, or of unlearning the way to be a hero that previously relied on her suppression of the feminine aspects of herself. I read this breakage as a way of forcing Alanna to reconcile the lack of a visible marker of masculine heroism with the presence of her female embodiment. Lightning's destruction also creates a crisis of confidence because it serves as an authorizing force of Alanna. Other characters even criticize Alanna during this point as "not fighting with all of [her],"[60] which of course, she can't, because her identity is in figurative pieces. Lightning's breakage presents Alanna's challenge not only as a quest to literally reconstruct the sword but also to figuratively reconstruct her heroic identity.

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[58] Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 31.

[59] Sahn, 45.

[60] Pierce, 79.

Neomedieval weapons cannot usually be mended by mundane or normal means (like blacksmithing), especially when their repair is symbiotically reliant on some form of character development for their bearer. Instead, weapons are often presented as irreparable except through said character development, impossible until suddenly possible.[61] Similarly, Alanna unsuccessfully attempts to repair Lightning, when a blacksmith named Gammal tries to help Alanna mend it by normal means:

> [He] picked up the long portion of Lightning's blade with his tongs, thrusting the metal into the fire until he judged it hot enough. Alanna thought she heard an ugly hum… "Could you mend the sword yourself?" the smith wanted to know?...Alanna shook her head. "I could mend an ordinary sword," she called, "but not one so well made." Gammal pulled the length of metal from the forge and she put up the bellows. Without the wheezing, she could clearly hear the humming sound from Lightning's sheared-off blade. "Gammal, don't—" she began, but the smith was striking. His hammer met the glowing metal; everyone was knocked down by the resulting explosion. When Alanna struggled to her feet, the fire was out, the anvil was cracked down the center, and Gammal was unconscious.[62]

Alanna's first attempt at re-forging Lightning using normal blacksmithing techniques and tools is not just a failure, but a dangerous experiment with violently explosive consequences. This passage also further highlights Lightning's status as vibrant matter rather than inanimate object. Alanna's sword is anything but ordinary, and it cannot be fixed by ordinary methods. This passage is another indication of the symbiotic function; Lightning remains fragmented so long as Alanna's identity is in crisis, and only by recuperating and reintegrating the discarded parts of herself can Lighting too have its integrity restored.

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[61] As I will discuss in the following section where I address examples of urban/low fantasy in children's and young adult literature, another example of this same concept is Harry Potter's repeated failed attempts to repair his holly and phoenix feather wand, where not until the completion of his heroic journey at the end of *Deathly Hallows* does his wand *become fixable* using the Elder Wand.
[62] Pierce, 52.

The journey to repairing Lightning involves two main elements: Alanna's taming of the crystal sword that breaks Lightning, and her participation in traditionally feminine crafts and mentorship of young women. During this period where Lightning remains broken, Alanna attempts to tame and master the crystal sword, which seems to possess an antagonistic magic of its own. Given the established prowess and divine nature of Lightning, any sword able to break it must be equally or extraordinarily powerful:

> She gripped the silver hilt of the crystal blade and drew it. The sword's magic screeched through her. Alanna bit back a yell of pain. Sweat poured down her face as she struggled with pure magic, forcing it slowly to her will. At last the sword's resistance lessened. "It's magic, but the magic's been used for killing and breaking. It can only be controlled by someone with the Gift [of magic]."[63]

The crystal sword is the inverse of Alanna's Lightning: they are both magical swords, both from powerful bearers, but whereas Lighting interpellates Alanna, the crystal sword offers a rejection of everything Alanna is. Pierce writes:

> Alanna studied the crystal sword. Its hilt was slightly longer than Lightning's, etched with occult symbols and studded at the pommel with sapphires and diamonds. She had seen symbols like these recently… "Roger," she whispered. "The hilt—it's the same as Duke Roger's wizard's rod. I'll never be free of him!"[64]

Alanna's discovery that the sword originates from Duke Roger further necessitates Alanna's repair of Lightning as the crystal sword's foil, and also provides the catalyst for Alanna's heroic journey to progress. Since it is Duke Roger who exposes her as female during their battle at the climax of *In the Hand of the Goddess*, his weapon is one that symbolically and literally continues to challenge her legitimacy as a heroine.

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[63] Pierce, 35.

[64] 36.

Alanna's mentorship of young women in *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* serves as the second prerequisite for her ability to repair Lightning, a way of offering reparation for her individual female exceptionalism and instead demonstrating concern for all women. Flanagan has explained this problematic as a conflict between Alanna's feminine subjectivity and her adherence to a the "masculine sword hero's developmental path."[65] When Alanna takes three magical apprentices, two of whom are girls, she advocates for their right to sit at a traditionally all-male campfire. She also learns how to weave, and when her male apprentice demeans it as "women's work,"[66] Alanna defends such skills and knowledge without realizing she is making the same case *for* them she once used *against* herself in rejecting her own femininity as inferior. Alanna advocates for feminism in her tribe in ways she never does for knighthood: "These women are your equals. What they do—what they learn—is just as important as what you do and learn."[67] It is only after spending the entirety of *The Woman Who Rides Like A Man* mentoring her female apprentices, learning to weave, and generally coming to embrace her femininity that the paths to re-forging Lightning and constructing a public lady knight identity become clear.

The ability to mend her sword is thus only possible once Alanna reconstructs her feminine heroic identity and tames the crystal sword. At the end of *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man*, a sorceress tells her to "Take the crystal sword and make it one with

[65] Flanagan, 47.

[66] Pierce, *Woman,* 88.

[67] 89.

the sword that is your own."[68] This directive to bind Lightning with the crystal sword is allusive to Alanna's own need to bind her femininity with the rest of herself instead of ignoring or suppressing it as she has previously. When Alanna does so, she unites the crystal sword with Lightning and they meld together, indicating her refusal to allow the crystal sword to subjugate her.

Sahn argues that this scene demonstrates Alanna's new ability to "integrate her sense of masculinity and femininity as embodied practices of gender and power, rather than as stable, static identities."[69] In this way, *The Woman Who Rides Like A Man* explicitly aligns Alanna's gender dysphoria and internalized misogyny with the fragmentation of her heroic identity via the literal destruction of her sword. Accordingly, the successful repair of Lightning by integrating it with the crystal sword coincides with Alanna's reconstruction of her heroic identity as one that embraces and includes femininity.

In the *Song of the Lioness* quartet's final book, *Lioness Rampant*, Pierce parallels the status of Lightning with Alanna's newly-constructed feminine heroic identity and refusal to be regulated by repressive patriarchal institutions. In the final climactic battle with a now-resurrected Duke Roger, he calls the crystal sword to him, trying to pull it from Alanna's arms and leave her weaponless. Pierce describes how the crystal sword half of Alanna's re-forged Lightning attempts to return to its original owner:

> Lightning jumped, straining toward Roger. If she had still carried his original sword, instead of melding it with Lightning for a whole blade, she never could

[68] 221-2.

[69] Sahn, 157.

> have kept hold of it. As it was, enough of the crystal blade and its hilt remained to wrench her arms as Alanna gripped it."[70]

Alanna only succeeds in this battle once she decides to stop fighting Roger's pull on the sword and let it go. She allows Lightning to fly out of her hands and surprise Roger, burying itself in his chest and killing him. This scene parallels Alanna's initial discovery of Lightning, in which she has to accept death in order to be saved. More importantly, we might read this action as one directly related to her heroic identity: by allowing the sword to fly out of her hands, Alanna lets go of the signifier of the institution from which she sought recognition for her entire childhood and young adulthood, allowing her to make her way forward on her own terms.

In giving up Lightning, Alanna demonstrates her acceptance of a feminine heroic identity and rejects the institution the sword represents in favor of one she has constructed herself. She voluntarily relinquishes the signifier of the institution that was only willing to authorize her as a man, recognizing that it represents something that repressed her for most of the series. This reversion of the sword's significance as authorizing force culminates in *Lioness Rampant* by ending Alanna's story the way King Arthur's begins, with a sword in a stone:

> Lightning stood there, thrust into the center of the design. The blade was streaked with soot, the jewels of its hilt cracked and blackened. Jonathan gripped the sword, trying to free it without success.
>
> "It's all right," Alanna told him. "I don't want it. There are other swords, and I like Lightning right where it is."
>
> Jon released the weapon and looked at his filthy hands. "Good."[71]

[70] Pierce, Tamora. *Lioness Rampant*, 292.
[71] Pierce, 299.

Pierce offers this scene as a final rejection of the neomedieval ideals the earlier books use to authorize Alanna's female exceptionalism. Instead of questioning Jon's kingship here—and we *are* supposed to recognize him as the rightful king despite his failure to pull the sword from the stone floor—the text destabilizes the institution itself. Whereas being able to retrieve Lightning in *Alanna: The First Adventure* demonstrates Alanna's acknowledgement of neomedieval authorization via the phallocentric institution of knighthood, this final scene in *Lioness Rampant* shows Alanna moving beyond it and pursuing heroism on her own terms and with her own sense of identity. Alanna probably *could* pull Lightning out of the stone floor, but she chooses not to, and that's what matters here. Alanna rejects the authority of the institution that disallows women from training to be knights, the same institution that prompts her to suppress and reject the feminine parts of herself.

Alanna *choosing* to leave the sword here signifies that her identity has shifted from its external object-orientation through Lighting to internal heroism within Alanna herself, thus rendering irrelevant the integrity of the weapon that previously outwardly marks her as heroic. This is a major subversion of this trope, as it uses the sword—an iconic representation of specifically masculine martial heroism—to undermine and disrupt the very institution it symbolizes. Pierce thus uses these sword motifs to establish Alanna's legitimacy within this sexist system, but through Alanna's character development, Pierce gradually decreases the emphasis on Lightning as a representation of her heroism until this final moment where both Alanna and the reader are able to lay it aside and reject its exclusive, patriarchal, and aristocratic associations. For the young adult reader, this is the moment of understanding the potential of the future and the

heroine's ability to determine it for herself without the need for others to validate or legitimize her.

The final entry in *Song of the Lioness* asks readers to consider their own positions of complicity in repressive institutions, demanding self-reflection and communal consideration. Whereas Alanna's motivation throughout the series is her own self-interest and promotion, this final act of leaving Lightning and all it represents behind is one of concern for the future and for other young women who want to become knights, presaging Pierce's future series *The Protector of the Small* in which another young woman openly pursues knighthood. The heroine of that series, Keladry of Mindelan (Kel), faces significant gender-based discrimination and obstacles as she undergoes knighthood training, demonstrating that Alanna's efforts towards lasting change for the institution of knighthood are incomplete and reinforce her own exceptionalism.

Whereas Alanna suppresses her femininity and deceives all of Tortall to pursue her own goal of knighthood, Kel does so while openly female, though the result is that she has to work harder and be better than all of her male cohorts. Nevertheless, *Song of the Lioness*'s arc shifts from female exceptionalism and traditional gender expectations to espousing the need for collective action, supporting the goal of equality for all young women. This use of neomedievalism to advocate for feminist growth from individualism to collectivism creates not only a new type of young adult fantasy heroine but opens up the way for recuperative medievalism to include those left behind by exclusionary cultural ideals. The significance of Pierce's feminist neomedieval fantasy is legible via the queer, rhetorical, adaptable functions of neomedieval swords, and such weapons'

significance ought to be explored further across children's and young adult literature and media.

My case study of Tamora Pierce's *Song of the Lioness* can be used a model for how we can read swords as mediators of conflicting ideologies between medievalism and modernity. By performing such readings of swords as neomedieval signifiers in children's and young adult fantasy, we can move beyond their traditional associations with legitimacy, leadership, and masculinity to more inclusive interpretations of heroism. For young readers, a character's shift from reliance on a powerful weapon to internal heroic development offers a narrative rite of passage, of growing up and growing *into* oneself. Pursuing interpretations of medievalism that are more inclusive and equitable offers creators and audiences new modes of engaging with the past in the present. In addition to such recuperative feminist readings of young adult fantasy, the functions of neomedieval weapons in popular medievalism offer radical interpretive potential across critical cultural studies.

Swords, Wands, and Death: Neomedieval Weapon Motifs in *Harry Potter*

In J.K. Rowling's[72] *Harry Potter* series of books and their associated film adaptions, the narrative embraces and appropriates numerous literary and mythic traditions, of which medieval romance is a prominent example. Rowling's neomedievalism manifests in many ways, most notably in her depiction of weapon motifs

[72] Just as with Joss Whedon's fall from grace as the auteur of the *Buffy*verse, so too has J.K. Rowling's public authorial persona become at odds with the ostensibly inclusive nature of her *Harry Potter* series. As of this writing, Rowling has doubled down on her transphobic worldviews and has also been criticized of perpetuating anti-Semitic stereotypes. The inclusion of *Harry Potter* in this dissertation does *not* indicate my support of J.K. Rowling's views.

within her narrative structure and character development. *Harry Potter* employs each of the sword motifs I identified in the Introduction, but my discussion here will focus on how the series redefines heroism as a product of individual choice rather than destiny. Each character I will discuss moves beyond the lineage and expectations they inherit to establish their own individual heroic identities, using neomedieval weapon motifs to demonstrate these heroic journeys. This is one edge of the double-edged sword I metaphorically address in this project, because just as *Harry Potter* seems to offer a progressive idea of heroism, on its other edge, it also relies upon and exists completely within a while male heroic paradigm drawn from British (and indeed Arthurian) lineage.

The characters Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Neville Longbottom are central to Rowling's thesis about heroism being a matter of choice rather than destiny. These three are all marked as special by their interactions with the neomedieval weapons most prominent in the series: the Sword of Godric Gryffindor, and their individual magical wands. Harry and Neville heroically pulling the Sword of Gryffindor from the Sorting Hat, and Ron removing it from the frozen lake in the Forest of Dean both reflect the authorizing functions of the neomedieval weapon. These same three characters Harry, Ron, and Neville all break and either repair or replace their wands within the narrative, employing the symbiotic function. Wands, like swords, are powerful instruments, and in this context are the essential weapons that the wizarding world uses, just like the swords of the late Middle Ages.[73] The nature of characters' wands is central to the series, and in

[73] Wands are also mystical, and Rowling's mythology of swords ascribes to that unique power for each of these magical weapons, putting into action both the metonymic and agentic qualities I identified in neomedieval weapon motifs. By using swords as well as wands to illustrate these neomedieval functions, and by restricting usage of these motifs to Harry, Ron, and Neville, Rowling's series engages with heroic neomedievalism. Most pointedly, *Harry Potter* attempts to disrupt fascist and white supremacist ideals as

fact, most of the main characters' wands have their own special significance—Harry's is Voldemort's twin, Ron's is his brother's, Neville's is his father's, Dumbledore's Elder Wand has a complete history of wand-bearers including Grindelwald, and so on. Borrowing and disarming wands plays a crucial role in the power dynamics of the series, as wands are so closely tied to their owners. Ollivander the wand maker emphasizes so often that the wand chooses the wizard, not the other way around, and in a series about choice and the power those choices have, wands cannot be overlooked.

As I have argued throughout this chapter, children's and young adult literature seems invested in introducing but ultimately rejecting the external object-orientation that defines its hero-protagonist' relationship with empowerment. Lisa Hopkins has addressed the neomedieval content in Rowling's works, arguing that it is "a paradigm that is there ultimately to be deviated from since the story of Arthur is one of an appointment with destiny, whereas the story of Harry is one of choices and decisions."[74] Whereas the medieval narratives of King Arthur, Sir Percival, and Sir Galahad rely on destiny and fatalism as primary plot devices, the *Harry Potter* series exists within that model of prophecy and destiny but seeks to emphasize instead the power of choice. Destiny here can mean a mystical end-point that is taken for granted for a character, a prophesy that

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illustrated by the pureblood/half-blood ("mudblood")/muggle tensions throughout the series.[73] Despite these negotiations of power and privilege, *Harry Potter* nevertheless falls short of successfully queering aristocratic, able-bodied, cis-het-male western heroic ideals. This is clearly demonstrable in the three heroes I have identified being significant for their engagement with neomedieval weapon motifs: Harry, Ron, and Neville are all cisgender, ostensibly straight, white boys of the Wizarding world's aristocratic equivalent, Wizarding families. Furthermore, while Ron Weasley's extended (and extensive) family is not wealthy, Harry and Neville have the additional privilege of being well-funded "orphans" whose guardians are not their parents but other family ties.

[74] Lisa Hopkins, "Harry Potter and Narratives of Destiny," in *Reading Harry Potter Again: New Critical Essays*, ed. Giselle Liza Anatol (Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2009), 63.

we expect applies to a specific character or situation, a divine calling, etc. but regardless is considered to be fixed and unchangeable. Rowling predisposes the reader to consider Harry a product of his circumstances only to have him make choices and decisions that not only set him apart from the medieval heroes to whom he is often compared, but also to juxtapose *Harry Potter* with these medieval narratives of destiny.

To that end, I will argue that Rowling's series consciously links the wielders of the sword of Gryffindor with those whose wands are rendered powerless, interrogating Ron Weasley, Neville Longbottom, and Harry Potter as heroic characters who displace destiny in favor of choice. Notably, all three of these characters are white, male, and come from wizarding lineages that offer them a certain level of power and prestige despite other factors (such as the Weasley family's poverty or Neville Longbottom's clumsiness). Inherent in this shift from external object-orientation to recognition of inner power is a rejection of reliance on objects as vehicles for identifying the self. In *Harry Potter*'s case, advocacy for heroism outside the norms and ideals is relegated to those other than the protagonist, unfortunately reinforcing for readers that a hero is still someone like Harry: straight, white, male, able-bodied, and wealthy (also aristocratic within the wizarding world).

Harry, Ron, and Neville have been identified by neomedievalism scholars as examples of heroes and leaders that fit quite well as medieval analogues. Heather Arden and Kathryn Lorenz have explored the possibility that Harry fits into the paradigm of Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval*.[75] Rather than assign Arthurian analogues to any of

[75] Heather Arden and Kathryn Lorenz, "The Harry Potter Stories and French Arthurian Romance," *Arthuriana: Quarterly of the International Arthurian Society, North American Branch*, Arthuriana, 13, no. 2 (2003): 54–68.

Rowling's characters, I will instead demonstrate how *Harry Potter's* heroes claim and identify with their Arthurian lineage and then how the series uses these same weapon motifs to identity the heroes as being distinct from it. This neomedieval motif plays out in *Harry Potter* with the sword of Godric Gryffindor, the founder of the Hogwarts house of Gryffindor. All three of the characters (Harry, Ron, and Neville) that succeed in wielding the sword are in this house, and their trials with the sword prove their worthiness as members of the house of Gryffindor, which values courage and chivalry above all else.

The choice to make Gryffindor attributes characteristic of these three protagonists passively but firmly links it to Arthurian romance, which also values these traits. Readers are intended to favor the Hogwarts house of Godric Gryffindor (because it is Harry's house), and it's important to clearly state that this reinforces a British (Arthurian) lineage as ideal. Whereas Salazar Slytherin's house more directly engages with the wizarding equivalent of white supremacy (blood purity), Gryffindor nevertheless upholds the hierarchy of wizard > muggle. Hogwarts' other founders do not attempt to destabilize or disempower the Slytherin viewpoint, instead reifying its legitimacy by making it one of the four Hogwarts houses. Thus, while the series authorizes Harry, Ron, and Neville as worthy Gryffindors, it does not invite discussion of whether Gryffindor is something the characters *should* aspire to given its passive acceptance of racism.

Harry Potter establishes the heroism of three of its protagonists by authorizing them via the Sword of Gryffindor, a feat that first Harry, then Ron, and finally Neville accomplishes as part of their heroic journey. We do not need reinforcement of Harry as hero, since the books are eponymous and that is readily apparent, but it is important for the series to characterize him as a clear Gryffindor. Harry's Sorting in *Harry Potter and*

the Philosopher's Stone identifies a dichotomy between Gryffindor and Slytherin, where the hat tells Harry he could be great in Slytherin. It is Harry's desire conveyed to the Sorting Hat to *not* be in Slytherin that places him in Gryffindor, an indication that choice, not destiny, is what defines who Harry is.

Harry's ability to later pull the Sword of Gryffindor from the Sorting Hat reinforces to readers that he *is* authorized as a Gryffindor, so whether by choice or destiny, he is in the right place. Harry retrieves the sword unknowingly and without understanding the significance of its discovery. When his fight against the deadly basilisk at the end of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* becomes desperate, Harry pulls the sword of Gryffindor from the Sorting Hat and uses it to slay the basilisk and destroy Tom Riddle's diary:

> The Basilisk had swept the Sorting Hat into Harry's arms. Harry seized it. It was all he had left, his only chance. He rammed it onto his head and threw himself flat onto the floor as the Basilisk's tail swung over him again.
>
> 'Help me … help me …' Harry thought, his eyes screwed tight under the Hat. 'Please help me!'
>
> There was no answering voice. Instead, the Hat contracted, as though an invisible hand was squeezing it very tightly.
>
> Something very hard and heavy thudded onto the top of Harry's head, almost knocking him out. Stars winking in front of his eyes, he grabbed the top of the Hat to pull it off and felt something long and hard beneath it.
>
> A gleaming silver sword had appeared inside the Hat, its handle glittering with rubies the size of eggs.[76]

The ease with which Harry pulls the sword out of the Sorting Hat is alike to that of the young Arthur who pulls the sword from the stone repeatedly and with such ease. Ron

[76] J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets*, (New York: Scholastic Paperbacks, 2000), 319.

expresses great surprise at Harry's feat, ascribing more significance to the event than perhaps Harry himself does.

Dumbledore externalizes this authorization for Harry that "Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled *that* sword out of the hat."[77] The sword itself, which is introduced to readers earlier in the series, is clearly a magical object not only for its ability to appear out of a hat in true magician fashion, but also as a magical sword in its own right. The sword chooses to present itself to a worthy student who displays the necessary characteristics, just as wands in the series lore choose the wizard meant to bear them, equating these two weapons in another significant way. Dumbledore's words equate the Sorting Hat with the stone in which the medieval "sword in the stone" is set, as well as the inscription upon it that designates the person to remove it as special. While Arthur chooses to pull the sword from the stone, Harry does not *seek* the sword, only chooses to place the hat on his head in his moment of desperation, not even sure what will happen. Because Harry is literally hit over the head with it, this example humorously acknowledges the medieval motif but also demonstrates that Harry is *not* the same here as Arthur.

Ron Weasley's retrieval of the sword recalls the lady of the lake, who gives Arthur the sword Excalibur in several iterations of the story,[78] as well as the

[77] Ibid., 334.

[78] It is important to note that while more recent versions of this story conflate the sword in the stone with the sword Excalibur, they are originally two separate swords. In the Welsh tradition, Arthur's sword is Caledfwlch, and in the Irish tradition the sword Caladbolg is thought to be the equivalent, and in the original Latin it is called Caliburn. There are numerous spelling discrepancies, and scholars are ambivalent on whether some of these sword names are drawn from each other or another separate root.

aforementioned marble slab floating in the river from which Galahad removes a stuck sword. Ron acts intentionally here, in comparison with Harry who had no idea what he was doing when placing the hat on his head. However, Ron's primarily objective is not to retrieve the sword; his goal is to save Harry from drowning, and he only pulls the sword out of the lake afterwards. In fact, Ron handles the sword in the lake in the Forest of Dean by accident, resulting only from Harry's failure to retrieve it, just as Bedevere in the Lancelot-Grail Cycle handles Excalibur only upon Arthur's mortal injury.

Ron does not even seem to realize what he has done until afterwards: "Ron looked down at his hands. He seemed momentarily surprised to see the things he was holding. 'Oh yeah; I got it out,' he said, rather unnecessarily, holding up the sword for Harry's inspection. 'That's why you jumped in, right?"[79] The framing here understates the significance of Ron's heroic retrieval of the sword from the lake in favor of his rescuing Harry. Nevertheless, the "daring, nerve, and chivalry" which the Sorting Hat explains as "setting Gryffindors apart"[80] seem to be more realized here in Ron diving in to save Harry than in anyone's usage of the sword. Rather, their friendship is of paramount importance here, and regardless, Ron demonstrates heroism in his double feat of rescuing Harry and obtaining the sword of Gryffindor.

This shift away from recognition of the feat of retrieving the sword in favor of saving lives with it acknowledges the motif but places more importance on Ron's choice to save Harry than on his ability to retrieve the sword. Despite Ron's agency in this scene and his importance as Harry's savior, he still appears unwilling to take control, to be the

[79] Ibid., 372.

[80] J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, 1st edition (New York: Scholastic, 1999), 118.

hero and destroy the Slytherin locket: "When Ron offered the sword, however, Harry shook his head. 'No, you should do it.' 'Me?' said Ron, looking shocked. 'Why?' 'Because you got the sword out of the pool. I think it has to be you.'"[81] It is Harry's confidence in Ron, and his certainty that Ron's ability to claim the sword has great significance, which imbues him with the strength to destroy the horcrux, the courage to be a hero and stand on his own.

Ron diving into the water to save Harry from drowning and his destruction of the horcrux is an additional double-deed, saving both Harry's body and his mind, the latter of which was corrupted by the malicious power of the Slytherin locket. These symbolically significant feats also seem to compensate for Ron's lack of prowess as a fighter or a leader and his lack of ambition thereof. Though Ron's magical skills are repeatedly mocked or degraded after demonstrations of incompetence or foolishness throughout the series, this event is Ron's major redemptive moment in which the rest of his characterization fails to matter as much as his heroism.

Neville Longbottom, who has throughout the series been characterized as fearful, bumbling, and incompetent, is the only hero of the three to purposefully draw the sword of Gryffindor from the Sorting Hat, a clear reversal of our expectations. During the Battle of Hogwarts in *Hallows,* Voldemort makes an example of Neville by cursing him and setting him on fire with the Sorting Hat on his head:

> In one swift, fluid motion Neville broke free of the Body-Bind Curse upon him; the flaming Hat fell off him and he drew from its depths something silver, with a glittering, rubied handle –

[81] J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2009), 373.

> The slash of the silver blade could not be heard over the roar of the oncoming crowd, or the sounds of the clashing giants, or of the stampeding centaurs, and yet it seemed to draw every eye. With a single stroke, Neville sliced off the great snake's head, which spun high into the air, gleaming in the light flooding from the Entrance Hall, and Voldemort's mouth was open in a scream of fury that nobody could hear, and the snake's body thudded to the ground at his feet.[82]

Neville takes charge in the fight against Voldemort here only because Harry is presumed dead and the crowd needs a morale boost in the ensuing battle; Neville is thus the remaining hero and leader. Patricia Donaher and James M. Okapal have emphasized[83] that according to Sybill Trelawney's prophesy, Neville *could* have been that Chosen One if not for Voldemort's decision to attack Harry instead. This reinforces that it is choice (in this case, Voldemort's), not destiny, that enables these characters' heroism.

Neville's ability to acquire and use the sword in this way certainly affirms he possesses the same heroic qualities that define Harry's status as the Chosen One. Although it is Voldemort who forcefully places the Sorting Hat on Neville's head in a mockery of their entire house and cause, Neville himself chooses to draw the Sword of Gryffindor from it, and then actually wields it, symbolically accepting the responsibility it bestows upon him. This differs from Harry and Ron's examples because though each of them uses the sword to defeat or destroy a horcrux of Voldemort's making, they do so with few or even no witnesses. Neville effectively becomes a military leader directly in the face of his opponent, with an army behind him. Neville Longbottom's character has

[82] Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 733.

[83] Donaher, Patricia, and Okapal, James M. "Causation, Prophetic Visions, and the Free Will Question in Harry Potter" in *Reading Harry Potter Again*, Ed. Gisette Lisa Anatol. 49-50.

demonstrated the virtue of courage repeatedly in the series, despite his characterization as a clumsy, forgetful, scared child.

The Sword of Gryffindor authorizes Harry, Ron, and Neville as Gryffindors who display heroic characteristics deemed worthy by the sword and the reader. Every use of the sword depicted in the series helps destroy a horcrux, either indirectly or directly, with the exception of Harry himself and the lost diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw.[84] Albus Dumbledore also fits into this category, as he uses the sword to destroy the Gaunt ring, another horcrux. It is Dumbledore who bequeaths the sword to Harry and instructs Severus Snape on the conditions of its acquisition, which each of the three wielders does unknowingly fit: "Do not forget that it must be taken under conditions of need and valor – and he must not know that you give it."[85] In addition to wielding the Sword of Godric Gryffindor, Ron, Neville, and Harry each has their wand break in the series.

Broken weapons are indications of the symbiotic function of neomedieval weapons, and in the case of *Harry Potter,* they demonstrate a breakage from the character's lineage. Because wands are agentic and metonymic, we would expect that Rowling's statement that the "wand chooses the wizard" to work in conjunction with the fact that wand characteristics are supposedly externalizations of internal qualities.

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[84] In the film adaptation *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, *Part 2,* Harry stabs the diadem with the basilisk fang, while in the novel it is Vincent Crabbe who destroys it. All three characters all utilize the sword in the service of destroying a serpent of some kind, which further reinforces their Gryffindor-ness: Harry kills the basilisk with the sword in *Stone*, and then with the basilisk fang also destroys Tom Riddle's diary; in *Hallows,* Ron uses the sword to break the Slytherin locket etched with a snake on its face; and then Neville in a moment of astonishing heroism beheads Voldemort's beloved pet snake/horcrux Nagini. This emphasizes the rivalry between Gryffindor, the lion, and Slytherin, the serpent, and in a tri-fold pattern summarily destroys all things associated with Salazar Slytherin foreshadowing the victory of Gryffindor as the representatives of good in the Manichean battle of the series.

[85] Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 689.

However, in the case of Harry, Ron, and Neville, there are additional elements at play that set each of the characters up to distance them from their wands and their associated inherited expectations. Ron and Neville's wands are both familial hand-me-downs, making it impossible for their wants to choose or reflect them as individuals, and Harry's chooses him but really demonstrates a twin lineage with Voldemort's wand, with which it shares a phoenix feather core. The qualities of wands that Rowling explains on Pottermore and throughout the book series suggests that characterization of the wielder can be extrapolated from the properties of the wand that chooses them.

In each case, the breakage of the hero's wand necessitates repair or replacement and identifies a moment of rupture between the hero and their lineage. Ron's wand does not choose him; it is a hand-me-down from his older brother Charlie, which suggests, along with the properties of his wand,[86] that Ron's magical skills are dampened by using this particular wand. When Ron and Harry crash the flying Ford Anglia in the Whomping Willow at the beginning of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Ron's wand snaps in half: "'My wand,' said Ron in a shaky voice. 'Look at my wand—' It had snapped, almost in two; the tip was dangling limply, held on by a few splinters."[87] Given that Rowling spends much of the characterization of Ron in the first two books reinforcing his lack of magical skill, however, this is like breaking a prosthetic limb. Ron replaces it with one purchased from Ollivander's, which presumably does choose him. Notably, both Ron's first wand and his retrieval of the sword of Gryffindor are hand-me-downs, the first literal, the second figurative. In neither case is Ron the primary intended character, which

[86] Ash and unicorn hair, both of which Rowling describes on Pottermore as cleaving to their first owner, being absolutely loyal and not working well for anyone else.
[87] Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets*, 74.

could suggest that Rowling's narrative places secondary importance on Ron's involvement but also seeks to displace Harry's destiny onto other characters.

I see this as an indication that Ron's wand predisposes him to be less successful than some others magically, and when it breaks, the narrative gives him the opportunity to make his own choice, to take his destiny into his own hands. He is then able to step into the spotlight and, even in situations where heroism is not intended for him (such as with the sword in the Forest of Dean) appropriate it for himself. Though Ron is not an equal of Neville or Harry in the sense that he is never considered "destined" to fight Voldemort, he is a heroic character nonetheless. The entire locket sequence serves to assert Ron's importance in the trio, to set him apart from and also make him an equal of The Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One, the famous Harry Potter.

Neville Longbottom too bears a hand-me-down wand, and carries the weight of his institutionalized parents' absence. For Neville, his incapacitated father's hand-me-down wand represents both his history of magical incompetence and the legacy of his parents in the fight against Voldemort. That his first wand is not initially meant for him echoes the situation with Ron's, as neither was given the choice of a wand, but simply inherited one, just as both inherited their pure-blooded families' magical expectations (and in some ways failed to live up to them). Neville's wand breaks during the battle in the Department of Mysteries at the climax of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*: "Neville crawled rapidly toward [Hermione] from under the desk, his wand held up in front of him. The Death Eater kicked out hard at Neville's head as he emerged—his foot

broke Neville's wand in two and connected with his face."[88] Neville similarly replaces his broken wand with one purchased from Ollivander's. Martha Wells has suggested that at this point Neville completes his hero's journey,[89] but it seems more likely that it is complete only after his retrieval and use of the sword. In this moment, thought, Neville has the opportunity to break away from the lineage he has inherited from his parents and become his own person – become heroic, if he so chooses. This is a crucial moment in Rowling's narrative for showing audiences that it is choice, not destiny, that makes a hero, and it is accomplished with the breakage of Neville's wand.

Harry Potter's wand breaking is, unsurprisingly, the most complex situation of the three, due to all the imbued expectations in his holly & phoenix feather's wand and because of the presence of the Elder Wand. Harry's wand breaks in Godric's Hollow during *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, when a rebounding curse from Hermione hits him instead of Nagini, and the wand is held together only by its phoenix feather core:

> The holly and phoenix feather wand was nearly severed in two. One fragile strand of phoenix feather kept both pieces hanging together. The wood had splintered apart completely. Harry took it into his hands as though it was a living thing that had suffered a terrible injury. He could not think properly: Everything was a blur of panic and fear. Then he held out the wand to Hermione.
> "Mend it. Please."
> "Harry, I don't think, when it's broken like this—"
> "Please, Hermione, try!"
> "*R-Reparo*."
> The dangling half of the wand resealed itself. Harry held it up.
> "*Lumos!*"
> The wand sparked feebly, then went out. Harry pointed it at Hermione.
> "*Expelliarmus!*"

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[88] J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Order of The Phoenix* (New York; Prince Frederick, MD: Scholastic Paperbacks, 2004), 792.

[89] Wells, Martha. "Neville Longbottom: The Hero with a Thousand Faces" in *Mapping the World of the Sorcerer's Apprentice*, Ed. Mercedes Lackey. 106.

> Hermione's wand gave a little jerk, but did not leave her hand. The feeble attempt at magic was too much for Harry's wand, which split into two again. He stared at it, aghast, unable to take in what he was seeing…the wand that had survived so much…[90]

In this passage, Harry fails to permanently repair his wand like many of his medieval literary predecessors with swords, but unlike Ron and Neville who then simply replace their wands, repairing this wand that the text so heavily emphasizes *is* meant for him becomes central to his quest.

When Harry wins the allegiance of Draco's hawthorn wand, and by extension the Elder Wand, and even when he uses Hermione's wand in the interim, he affirms that nothing feels quite like his own wand. In other words, although the Elder Wand chooses Harry, Harry doesn't choose it in return. His rejection of the Elder Wand not only asserts the text's social agenda that Harry is *not* Arthur and does not carry a weapon more powerful and protective than any other like Arthur's Excalibur, but it also reasserts the importance of connection between his wand and Voldemort's own. Furthermore, these characters' ability to see their inner strength and develop distinct identities from their wands helps demonstrate my main argument. Children's and young adult literature superficially focuses on objects for power and identity formation but ultimately invites characters (and readers) to find themselves within and reject reliance on said objects.

Rather than keeping it to wield and be the most powerful wizard in existence, Harry uses the Elder Wand to repair his own wand and then buries it with Dumbledore. The repair of Harry's holly and phoenix feather wand using the Elder Wand is a further

[90] Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 348–9.

example of how *Harry Potter* moves from object orientation to inner power. In this scene, Harry rejects the Elder Wand (the most powerful wand in existence, which makes the bearer invincible), to the surprise of those around him. But although Harry has a right to this weapon and indeed, it is loyal to him already, he does not seek to use its power (a reference back, perhaps, to the way that Harry was able to procure the Philosopher's stone in the first book). Instead, he uses it only to repair his own wand, which following the climax of the series' battle against Voldemort, no longer has any significance as Voldemort's wand's twin:

> Harry held up the Elder Wand, and Ron and Hermione looked at it with a reverence that, even in his befuddled and sleep-deprived state, Harry did not like to see.
>
> "I don't want it," said Harry.
>
> "What?" said Ron loudly. "Are you mental?"
>
> "I know it's powerful," said Harry wearily. "But I was happier with mine. So…"
>
> He rummaged in the pouch hung around his neck, and pulled out the two halves of holly still just connected by the finest thread of phoenix feather. Hermione had said that they could not be repaired, that the damage was too severe. All he knew was that if this did not work, nothing would. He laid the broken wand upon the headmaster's desk, touched it with the very tip of the Elder Wand, and said "*Reparo*."
>
> As his wand resealed, red sparks flew out of its end. Harry knew that he had succeeded. He picked up the holly and phoenix wand and felt a sudden warmth in his fingers, as though wand and hand were rejoicing at their reunion.[91]

In both cases, the wand is either figuratively or literally rendered inert, and brings both Dumbledore's arc and the greater narrative to a close. Harry here chooses the wand that represents who he really is, who he wants to be, rather than who the world would have him be. He has every right to the Elder Wand, and if this were any other narrative, he

[91] Ibid., 748–9.

might take it, but Harry sees himself in the holly and phoenix feather wand, free from his destiny as the one Chosen to defeat Voldemort.

It is possible, likely even, that J.K. Rowling references Arthurian literature directly in Harry's destruction/disposal of the Elder Wand. It, like Excalibur, is a weapon more powerful than any other. In the hero's hands it has done good, but in the hands of another it may do evil, and so it must be cast away and hidden. Harry's rejection of this weapon indicates that unlike Voldemort, who seized power at the expense of anything and anyone around him, including his own humanity, Harry's desires are much more reasonable. He is not the power-hungry or omniscient hero that he could be, and neither is he any longer the "Chosen" one as indicated by his wand. The twinning of sword-wielders and wand-breakers in *Harry Potter* suggests Rowling allows multiple characters to share the designation of 'Chosen One,' though it still restricts heroic acts to characters who fit traditional ideals. These characters are interpellated by their ability to wield the Sword of Gryffindor as well as their movement beyond reliance on the wand that has previously identified and metonymically stood for them. The significance of these elements accompanying the greater anti-fascist narrative of *Harry Potter* stands as a way for the heroic characters to embody and represent those values, although superficially they retain adherence to traditional heroic masculinity.

In conclusion, the ways that children's and young adult literary examples employ neomedieval weapon motifs and functions demonstrates a general trend in reliance on magical or otherwise special objects to externalize heroism of the protagonist(s). Additionally, many texts attempt to show a transformation similar to growth to adulthood with identity formation and development that manifests as a shift from external object-

orientation to a recognition of and reliance on inner strength or heroism. As we have seen in the examples of Tamora Pierce and J.K. Rowling, this demonstrates varying priorities in presenting to child readers alternatives to the norms of cis-het, able-bodied, white, male heroes. With *Harry Potter*, readers are left with a sense that the Hermiones or Lavenders or Ginnys of the story do not get to participate in the neomedieval weapon motifs, and more identities yet do not even get to be represented on the page.

IV. MYTHICAL WEAPON TROPES AS CULTURAL CRITIQUE IN 21ST CENTURY SUPERHERO MEDIA

While the previous chapters have focused on the hero, in a more traditional sense, this final chapter diverges in that it addresses the *super*hero, an intentional hyperbole of the heroic character. The superhero by contrast to the everyperson draws a comparison and sheds light upon the ideal human qualities to which, these tales claim, we should all aspire. While the heroes of these narratives are more often than not superhuman or otherworldly, they often present arguments for what humanity should or could resemble, casting their fantastical players in allegorical, adapted, formulaic, or otherwise familiar stories to speak about heroism, courage, and hope. They are literally super-heroes, the best of the best, the manliest of men. These qualities, taken to an extreme, become models of toxic traits that become cautionary tales.

The superhero's flaws or the supervillain's characteristics may also demonstrate the anxieties or fears dominating the zeitgeist of the culture producing these superheroic narratives. Super-heroism is thus a distinct category from the heroes of the previous chapters, although supernatural heroes and superheroes are similar in some ways. For example, while Diana (*Wonder Woman)* is an Amazon and a superhero, the Amazons from *Xena: Warrior Princess* are not – generically, these two texts differ significantly in how they employ their mythic inspirations. As such, superheroic texts necessitate individual attention and I have thus separated them into their own chapter.

Superheroes from their origins in comics all the way to their current mainstream multi-media ubiquity have continually reflected the anxieties and ideals of the culture producing narratives about them. The examples I will discuss in this chapter offer a clear

case study for how a particular signifier – the heroic weapon – can function rhetorically to communicate these anxieties and ideals to the audience. 21st century superhero films from DC's Extended Universe and the Marvel Cinematic Universe employ traditional and familiar elements to make anti-fascist, pacifist, and egalitarian arguments about heroic ideals in the 21st century. Despite this, superheroic narratives employing the neomedieval weapon to do so retain loyalty to a white heritage, failing to entire dismantle the system they claim to critique. The vehicle by which I argue these narratives act rhetorically is the heroic weapon – the special item that only the superhero could acquire, only they can hold, that is the only thing that can defeat a particular enemy. These weapons and their relationship to the superhero wielding them demonstrate values about what heroism looks like, certainly, but also a vision for the world as a pacifist, egalitarian, feminist utopia.

21st century superhero films have translated the coded language from their often comic-book origins to convey the changing social priorities on film. While such films fundamentally cater to the needs of the adolescent male power fantasy, they now also address other fantasies, including radically different visions for our global community. Although the superhero film has transcended its stereotypically male audience and entered into mainstream popularity through the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and its competitor the DC Extended Universe (DCEU), the impetuses behind these fantasies are vicarious experiences of heroism, power, and desirability. As a traditionally male power fantasy, most of the superheroes I will discuss are male and exemplify masculine characteristics that cater to their traditionally cisgender male audience. Despite an increase in female viewership and interest, female superheroes still have only minority

representation. Properties such as *X-Men* have long been discussed for their queer, disabled, and Jewish-coded representation, opening up the discourse of super-heroism as a vehicle for reclaiming values and qualities not considered "ideal" by a given society.

Even more clear is the whiteness of mainstream super-heroism – only recently have mainstream narratives invested in their non-white superhero characters, such as with *Captain Falcon and the Winter Soldier* and *Black Panther*. The latter's vision of black excellence and African supremacy is a fantasy for all black U.S. Americans to grieve the loss of opportunity stolen from them via slavery and perpetuated subjugation in the western world. This is a notable demonstration of how production companies deem and thus greenlight what they believe is palatable to mainstream audiences. Similarly, no female Marvel superhero had her own film until *Captain Marvel* in 2019, followed shortly thereafter by *Black Widow* in 2021.

For reference, the Marvel Cinematic Universe released a total of twenty films featuring male superheroes or ensemble casts prior to *Captain Marvel*. One of its main characters Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow) was the only member of the Avengers team that featured in most of the aforementioned twenty films to *not* have been given a dedicated film up to that point. These examples of black and female superheroes being un-(or at least under)represented in Marvel's Cinematic Universe is demonstrable of larger cultural investments in upholding misogyny and white supremacy.[92]

[92] This is finally changing with the recent focus on more marginalized identities in MCU's television series (although this also invites less prestige and less profit); most notable is the currently airing *Ms. Marvel*, Disney+'s adaptation of Kamala Khan, a teen Muslim girl's superheroic journey. Also noteworthy is *Hawkeye,* whose titular protagonist is d/Deaf, and the earlier Marvel shows distributed through Netflix (*Jessica Jones*, *Daredevil*, and *Luke Cage* especially) whose protagonists do not represent the male, able-bodied, white heroic ideal.

Mainstream 21st century superheroes from DC and Marvel reflect a post-9/11 global landscape, identifying cultural, political, and economic challenges to a peaceful co-existent planet. In such films, superheroic narratives take up binaries like war/peace, land/sea, humanity/others, men/women, and individual/community, rhetorically addressing these issues via the signifier of the heroic weapon. Such issues are complex and interrelated, and a single two-hour film will inherently simplify a concept, eliding aspects that complicate it. This in turn enables differing responses from audiences dependent on personal experience and worldview.

Stuart Hall's concept of encoding/decoding, upon which much of this dissertation's argument relies, explains why we can observe a difference between the encoded meaning of the superheroic qualities and the audience's decoded understanding of these elements. For example, a hypermasculine superhero might to one viewer represent a heteronormative ideal, while to another might be rife with homosexual subtext. These differing interpretations of the same character, narrative, or text offer possibilities for complex and often contradictory meaning-making. When we examine the signifier of the heroic weapon in such superhero narratives, it is thus likely we will encounter interpretive complexity that depends on audience to fully decode the meanings of such symbols.

Current Marvel and DC films seem to be particularly conscious of several social issues, including in particular: climate change and the environment; feminism, especially as it relates to equality and constructions of masculinity; and (now vindicated) rising concerns about nationalism, xenophobia, and authoritarianism. While suspension of disbelief is necessary to accepting the existence of Atlantis, or alien races invading Earth,

or gods and time/space travelers walking unseen among humans, it is *not* difficult to see the real-life implications of nationalist and xenophobic policies such as "America First," a lack of concern for the symbiosis of humanity with the Earth, or even something as simple as an autocrat expressing control over his people.

It will become clear throughout this chapter that superhero films might superficially be concerned with the former – the superhuman and supernatural – but upon deeper examination, the way they employ motifs traditionally associated with leadership, military prowess, and aristocratic lineage demonstrates a concern for audience knowledge/expectations from the narratives' comic book origins & from their generic conventions, as well as a drive to make statements about the aforementioned social ideals. The particular cultural moment in which these 21st century U. S. American films have been produced and distributed reflects some of the most prevalent issues in discourse, staking their claim what 21st century superheroes *should* be and *should* stand for.

The ways in which superheroic narratives employ the neomedieval weapon are formulaic and reflect a tradition of convention/invention drawn from their long history in comics and other media. An interesting aspect of such narrative trajectories is that because of their variation as different writers and artists have taken up their series, conflicting and often entirely contradictory storylines and characterizations have occurred in a given superhero's media history. Their origin story, costume, values, and even more inherent things such as gender or ability, can change as they pass from creator to creator. For this reason, the symbols associated with each superhero are malleable and can hold multiple meanings, and the audience must be deft at interpreting them in each iteration.

For my purposes, this means that the heroic weapon could mean one thing in a given text and something entirely different in another – it is thus a challenge to find a pattern. Nevertheless, whatever these signifiers mean, they generally retain a clear association with their superhero.

Andrew Bahlmann calls the image/emblem that often features on superhero costume a "chevron,"[93] a symbol with/by which a superhero is identified and associated. These chevrons are part of a superhero's persona, and are often a way in which they are identifiable to audiences and other characters. For example, Batman's bat emblem on his chest piece also becomes the bat signal used to request Batman's assistance by the people of Gotham; the bat is not only iconic and immediately recognizable as Batman's symbol, but stands in for him when he is not there. These emblems are usually featured on the costume itself, but I suggest that we look beyond the clothing and consider accessories, including weapons or tools, as equally significant identifiers of superheroic characters. By examining these "chevrons" which in these cases take the shape of the neomedieval weapons the heroes wield, we can explore the ideals and values they represent.

In this chapter, I will focus on a few different examples of texts from the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the DC Extended Universe that demonstrate the ways the neomedieval weapon can be employed rhetorically to suit its particular cultural context and narrative. I will first look to DC and show how *Aquaman* gestures explicitly to its Arthurian inspiration and how it employs the neomedieval weapon motifs I have discussed throughout this project to support an explicitly anti-white supremacist and

[93] Bahlmann, Andrew. *The Mythology of the Superhero*, McFarland: 2016.

global humanist agenda. I will also demonstrate how in *Wonder Woman*, the film exploits audience expectations of the neomedieval weapon tropes we have come to understand and expect in heroic narratives for dramatic irony and to further its pacifist feminist agenda.

I will then turn to the Marvel Cinematic Universe for a more complex close reading of the warhammer Mjolnir's connections with several superheroes, arguing that we can trace their heroism (and the heroic ideals the films in which they appear espouse) through its use. More broadly, I will demonstrate how heroic weapons in the 21st century superhero film can offer cultural critiques that challenge the ideal of hypermasculinity-as-heroism. Wonder Woman's Godkiller sword, Aquaman's Trident of Atlan, and Thor's hammer Mjolnir all create ruptures in androcentric heroic models and offer cultural critiques resisting nationalism, genetic supremacy, and toxic masculinity. Furthermore, this characterizes the current stage in the superhero genre as revisionist, wherein the revisited stories adapt to bolster certain social ideals, using heroic weapons as the language with which these film narratives convey said ideals to audiences and reinvent what has become expected and outmoded.

Bidents, Tridents, and Quindents, Oh My!: *Aquaman* and Cultural Rhetoric

In the 2018 James Wan-directed DC film *Aquaman*, Jason Momoa's character Arthur Curry (the titular Aquaman) is the vehicle by which the film makes environmentalist, globalist, and anti-white supremacist arguments. *Aquaman*'s message, conveyed through a conventional superhero origin story, problematizes ideas about lineage and class/racial supremacy, as well as making an anti-nationalist argument that

the world's land and oceans must operate symbiotically. The narrative achieves this through the conflict between Arthur Curry and his half-brother Orm Marius, the erstwhile king of Atlantis. Casting Momoa (a Pacific Islander actor) as the hero-protagonist provides additional support for the film's rebuttals to white supremacy and also further reinforces its concerns about oceanic stewardship. In order to make such arguments, *Aquaman* strategically employs weapon motifs that are recognizable to and easily understandable by its audience, not with swords but with pronged spears (generally called tridents though they may have different numbers of prongs than three). In particular, the Lost Trident of Atlan and Arthur's mother's quindent (Atlanna's Trident) participate in broader neomedieval and mythic conventions of heroic weaponry, and act as signifiers by which the film executes its social agenda.

Aquaman is one of an innumerable list of cultural narratives that employ premodern literary sword motifs, in this case with tridents (three-pronged spears, usually used in fishing). The trident is an iconic weapon from Greek and Roman mythology, usually seen in the hands of the god of the seas: Poseidon or Neptune, respectively. Furthermore, the god of the underworld, Hades or Pluto, is commonly depicted with a bident (a two-pronged spear). The weapon motifs that *Aquaman* uses in the film with these pronged spears are part of the cultural toolbox that storytellers draw from to make universal ideas accessible and recognizable to consumers. It is unsurprising that the film draws on premodern heroic conventions, given that early on the film displays its meta-awareness of its medieval and mythical influences by highlighting Arthur Curry's connection to his kingly legendary namesake. *Aquaman* similarly establishes its familiarity with the aristocratic nature of the Arthurian court and their legendary heroic

weapons by highlighting Arthur Curry's princely inheritance of an Atlantean trident. Audiences generally understand the conventions of such weapons, and what it means to acquire or inherit one. It is this understanding that allows *Aquaman*'s narrative usage of neomedieval weapon motifs to speak to audiences about its social concerns.

Aquaman uses Atlanna's quindent to establish Arthur's lineage as a prince of the legendary city of Atlantis, showing that he is not only a legitimate heir but the recognized first-born son. It also immediately establishes him as being liminal, a character caught between two worlds, as is customary with all demi-gods and most heroes. They belong not to humanity nor fully to the supernatural, but somewhere in-between. Arthur learns of this lineage when he inherits his mother's queenly weapon, shown in direct contrast to the way his mortal fisherman father has raised him in his Atlantean mother's absence.[94] The quindent previously borne by Arthur's mother, Queen Atlanna of Atlantis, gives Arthur a connection to the world of his courtly responsibilities and title.

Arthur's inheritance of the weapon in Joseph Campbell's language acts as a kind of call to adventure, the impetus for the hero to embark upon the heroic journey. Inheriting the quindent also authorizes Arthur, both to us as the audience and to the film's diegetic public, as an Atlantean and the heir to its throne. This is especially important given that he appears different than the other Atlanteans in his line – his brother Orm (played by Patrick Wilson) as well as his mother Atlanna (played by Nicole Kidman) are both platinum blond/e. Thus, passing on Atlanna's quindent to Arthur is a way for the

[94] Atlanna is not dead, and survived her sacrifice to the creatures of the Trench, finding safety at the center of the Earth, which Arthur visits as he seeks the Trident of Atlan. Orm blames Arthur for his mother's death, even though it was Orm's father who decreed her a traitor.

film to authorize Arthur to both the viewer and to the other Atlanteans who doubt him. Pitting Arthur against Orm also calls into question the validity of paternal lineage vs. maternal lineage, since what makes Orm believe he is superior is his father's Atlantean blood.

The authorizing function of the neomedieval weapon is a common one, appearing in almost every example discussed throughout the project, and appearing more frequently than all the other functions. To audiences, this conveys that Arthur is the hero of the narrative (if the film's title hadn't already given that away) and that we as viewers should idealize him and the values of which his heroic persona is representative. Early on in the film, it is unclear what these values are beyond an expectation it will relation to water (the oceans) and humanity's relationship to it. *Aquaman* develops its rhetoric primarily through the main antagonist, Arthur's half-brother Orm, whose full-Atlantean blood (and the privilege that accompanies it) operates in direct opposition to Arthur's dual nature.

Along with the authorizing function of Atlanna's quindent, the film sets up another, even more authorizing neomedieval weapon: the Trident of Atlan. The way *Aquaman* describes the Trident of Atlan is much like how the medieval literary examples discussed earlier in this dissertation do; they establish the instructions for procurement and use, clarifying that the person who is able to obtain the weapon is special and uniquely suited for leadership. In this case, the Trident of Atlan is a legendary weapon not only hidden in some unknown location in the depths of the ocean, but requiring completing a difficult trial to prove oneself worthy of taking it. This, like Arthur's accomplishment of pulling the sword from the stone authorized him as the rightful king

of England, enables the rightful recognition of the hero as Ocean Master, the supreme ruler of the seas.

This neomedieval weapon trope functions as part of the narrative structure of the heroic narrative, fulfilling an impetus for the hero to leave home, and also a reward for their potential success. Furthermore, it enables the narrative to authorize both the hero *and* the values they stand for when the narrative establishes the protagonist as holding values that conflict with the narrative's antagonist. This is absolutely true for *Aquaman*, where the film sets brother against brother, pitting the half-Atlantean, half-human protagonist Arthur against his younger full-Atlantean half-brother Orm Marius. Orm is a trueborn heir of Atlantis produced by Arthur's mother Atlanna and the king of Atlantis when she returned to fulfill her royal obligations after falling in love with Arthur's father and bearing Arthur as her firstborn. This pits Arthur's perceived illegitimacy against Orm's pedigree as a fullblood Atlantean, which the latter perceives as a more legitimate claim to the throne despite being a second son. The film's narrative structure sets up pursuit of the Trident of Atlan as the only way to reclaim Arthur's rightful position as king of Atlantis, as a way to publicly authorize him to the diegetic world, yes, but more specifically to Orm himself. This is because the Trident of Atlan is the only thing that could possibly convince Orm that Arthur is legitimate, being a legendary and powerful symbol of the institution Orm represents.

Aquaman establishes not only a succession crisis that is reminiscent of its medieval inspirations, but also a compelling reason by which Arthur may be forced into heroic pursuit of the Trident of Atlan for the structure of the narrative. In setting up Orm as a foil for Arthur, the film considers conflicting worldviews and values to consider in

the discourse the narrative establishes. These are reflective of the ideals, anxieties, and desires of western cultural discourse in the early to mid-2010s during the production of the film. At this time, global concerns about the climate change crisis were dominating international discourse, along with great political conflict leading up to the 2016 United States Presidential Election. Continuing discussions of borders, immigration, and a troubling resurgence of alt-right and authoritarian political power were common anxieties in popular discourse and found their way in the cultural narratives produced at the time. By *Aquaman*'s release in 2018, Donald Trump was two years in power, most of the United States was forced to recognize that climate change was not only a real problem but also an imminent one after first a chilling polar vortex and then a massive heatwave devastated most of the country, and over three hundred mass shootings had taken place. All this was to say that audiences of *Aquaman* were primed to see the real-world implications of someone like the authoritarian, elitist warmonger King Orm being in power. I argue that the film uses the neomedieval weapons to illustrate this massive gap in worldview between Orm and Arthur, positioning audiences to first buy into Arthur's values as a fictional character and then to internalize them mimetically.

The narrative catalyst for Arthur's pursuit of the Trident of Atlan is the breakage of the Atlanna's quindent in a battle between Arthur and Orm, showing how *Aquaman* incorporates many of the functions of the neomedieval weapon throughout the structure of the film. Atlanna's quindent breaking not only demonstrates a challenge to Arthur's legitimacy (and, by extension, the legitimacy of what he represents), but also necessitates the repair or replacement of such a weapon. This also reflects the symbiotic and metonymic functions of the neomedieval weapon, where the Trident is representative of

Arthur, his spirit broken as his mother's weapon shatters. The Trident of Atlan represents Arthur's claim to the Atlantean throne, its breakage an apparent rejection of his legitimacy. As seen throughout medieval and neomedieval examples, when a heroic weapon breaks, the hero usually either repairs it through some trial or demonstration of virtue, or replaces it with yet another weapon. In this case, Arthur is convinced to pursue the Trident of Atlan only because Orm is amassing an army that will control not only all the kingdoms of the sea, but also pursue war against the land.

With a human father awaiting him at home and his loyalty torn between land and sea, Arthur's values of coexistence, Earth conservation, and democratic leadership lead him to take action by pursuing the Trident of Atlan. This quest leads him to the center of the Earth, through a place called the Trench, where mysteries and fears of the deep unknown oceans manifest as terrifying creatures, inescapable pressure, and darkness. Surviving the journey down and discovering its location are the easier elements of the quest for the Trident of Atlan, representing the difficult trial only the best hero is intended to successfully complete. Once reaching its location, Arthur faces a leviathan guarding the Trident, a final challenge to prove himself worthy of wielding the Trident and the accompanying title of Ocean Master.

It is not unusual for such an occurrence to have a trial which the hero protagonist must pass in order to proceed; what is unusual is the *way* Arthur passes this test. It is unclear to viewers exactly what makes him worthy unlike all the others, but an educated assumption would be that Arthur's half-Atlantean, half-human status allows him to succeed where all others would fail. The leviathan, called the Karathen (and surprisingly voiced by Julie Andrews!) tells Arthur that many have sought the trident but none has

ever been worthy. Given his ability to speak to fish, Arthur is able to communicate with the Karathen and thus passes the test, which allows him to take the Trident of Atlan for himself and become Ocean Master.

In obtaining the trident, Arthur thus proves himself not only to the viewer but to Atlantis, meaning the only one standing in his way is his half-brother Orm, who blames Arthur for their mother's (supposed) death and cannot see why a half-Atlantean would have a stronger claim to the throne than he does. However, everyone else is swayed – within the diegesis of the film, being worthy of the Trident of Atlan overrides any concerns or doubts. This is very conventional in terms of weapon motifs, whereas in Arthurian literature, the sign by the sword in the stone indicates that "whosoever pulleth this sword from this stone and anvil is rightfully king of all England." Just as the young Arthur pulling the sword from the stone validates him as the true king of England, so too does Arthur Curry attaining the Trident of Atlan make him unquestionably the king of Atlantis. Whatever qualities Arthur possesses that cause characters to deem him unworthy or improper, the Trident of Atlan is enough to change all minds but Orm's.

So what does the film convey by validating Arthur Curry, Aquaman, as the rightful king of Atlantis? We must consider what each pretender to the throne stands for: Orm spends the majority of the film warmongering, demonizing land-dwellers for sea pollution, murdering his opponents, and voicing his pure-Atlantean superiority. Arthur Curry, on the other hand, stands for a globalist approach to environmental justice, an equal love of land and sea, and egalitarianism in the face of ethnic supremacists. If an audience weren't already convinced that Orm is villainous and Arthur is heroic, their

disparate treatment of side characters Princess Mera and Vizier Vulko would also bring viewers to this same conclusion.

By favoring Aquaman's claim to the throne of Atlantis, the film demonstrates a social agenda that counters xenophobia, racial/ethnic supremacy, toxic masculinity, and nationalism. By using this neomedieval weapon motif to establish Arthur firmly as the savior of the land and seas, the true king of Atlantis, and Ocean Master, *Aquaman* makes a social argument that challenges its contemporary political climate. Since the film is using the Atlantean hierarchy and mythology in order to validate what this society considers an outsider, it posits the ability to make change from within a social system rather than tearing it down from outside. This controversial social question seems to have an answer to political conflict, provided by *Aquaman* using the language of the oppressor.

Blue, Gold, and Red Herrings: The Godkiller in DC's *Wonder Woman*

In the 2017 Patty Jenkins-directed film adaptation of DC's *Wonder Woman*, Gal Gadot stars as the famous superhero Diana, an Amazon princess with her trusty Lasso of Truth and demi-goddess abilities like super strength, speed, healing, agility, and mystifying energy manipulation. Gadot's Wonder Woman is the embodiment of love as strategy for moving towards peace and justice. Despite the character's inherent values, Diana Prince is a consummate Amazonian warrior, having been raised on the hidden island of Themiscyra with other Amazons and trained in hand-to-hand and armed combat. In the *Wonder Woman* film, neomedieval weapon motifs function ironically, as (similar to Chapter 2's argument) the narrative sets audiences up to see the power of a neomedieval weapon in relation to the hero-protagonist, only to ultimately reveal the development of internal heroism independent of said weapon. In this case, the Godkiller

weapon serves as a red herring, misleading audiences into believing the film is adhering to conventions of the deicidal otherworldly weapon motif, only to reveal that Diana herself possesses these powers. This is only possible because audiences understand and have expectations about heroic narrative conventions, especially as they relate to neomedieval weapon motifs. The film thus exploits these expectations to set up one type of narrative and end up telling another. In this way, *Wonder Woman* distinguishes itself as an attempt to reframe the heroic ideal away from valor and prowess, protecting and engendering the use of alternate methods than simple force as strategies for addressing violence and conflict. This is possible because the primary conflict of the film is between Diana and the Greek god of war, Ares.

The deicidal otherworldly weapon motif, as Martin Puhvel identified it, is emblematic of a bellicose approach to conflict, its murderous potential in its very name. The film's approval of use of this deicidal otherworldly weapon, the sword Godkiller, occurs because of the threat posed by the main antagonist, Ares: global nuclear war. *Wonder Woman*, like the aforementioned *Aquaman* film, comes out of a period of international instability and civil conflict, enabling it to speak to dominant anxieties and fears from the time of its production and reception.

Just as Marvel's *Iron Man* positioned its conflict as mimetically representing post-9/11 fears of the Middle East rooted in xenophobia, Islamophobia, and orientalism, so too does *Wonder Woman* enable audiences to work through their anxieties (simplified and exaggerated thought they might be) about neofascism through the experience of the film's narrative. In fact, Ares's goal to restore paradise on Earth by destroying all humankind, which he deems irreparably corrupt, is a perfect representation of the "blood

and soil" approach to ecofascism. The rising tide of neofascism and in general prominence of increasingly far-right political powers across the world provides a perfect real-world backdrop against which to position the fictional narrative of *Wonder Woman*. The film fittingly situates its story near the end of World War I, a symbolic period in time that invites audiences to consider the consequences of global military conflicts, rather than directly acknowledging the global tensions at the time of its reception.

Viewers thus encounter what appear to be two conflicting ideologies about peace and justice: one that is militaristic and violent in nature, and the other that relies on pacifism & love to engender peace. The way that the film employs weaponry to make this distinction clear also creates new meaning for the Godkiller sword and for Diana herself. I suggest here that the meaning encoded into *Wonder Woman* is a message about non-violent social change, as well as a suggestion that even in the face of all-consuming destruction and global violence, hope is a more appropriate response than despair. Furthermore, it also calls into question whether there *is* potential for reclamation of the figure of the neomedieval sword, or whether its continued usage must be set aside as incompatible with committing to fully dismantle white supremacy. The film's refusal to ultimately adhere to the deicidal otherworldly weapon motif's expected outcome suggests the latter, but as with many of the other examples from this project, our interpretations of the functions of the neomedieval sword are complicated and often contradictory.

Wonder Woman initially appears to follow the deicidal otherworldly weapon trope closely, introducing an armory of godly weapons including a sword which viewers are led to understand is the "God Killer," a weapon powerful enough to kill the Amazons' final godly nemesis the warmonger Ares. In the film, the association of the name "God

Killer" with this particular special sword is purposefully only implied and never directly stated. Antiope, Diana's mother, explains to Diana how "Zeus left [them] a weapon… one powerful enough to kill a god." Audiences hear this description alongside an image of the aforementioned sword, held in this special armory in a place of honor befitting its supposedly mystical importance. The combination of this sound/image is the audience belief that the "God Killer," the weapon to which Antiope refers, is the sword pictured on screen. The film reinforces this assumption repeatedly, reiterating references to the God Killer's importance occur throughout Diana's upbringing, with each iteration accompanying visuals of Diana's desire to see the sword:

> "The God Killer. It's beautiful. Who would wield it?" Diana asks.
>
> The Queen of the Amazons, Hippolyta, responds, "I pray it will never be called to arms. But only the fiercest among us even could. And that's not you, Diana. You see? You are safe…and there is nothing you should concern yourself with."

Again, the film strategically overlays this dialogue on images of the sword in its special place in the Themyscira armory, heavily implying that the God Killer is the sword the film depicts as this dialogue occurs. This conflation of weapon/character is an example of the metonymic function of neomedieval weapons as described in the Introduction; this function enables the film's elision of clarity around who or what the "God Killer" actually is to be narratively sound.

The film further misdirects audiences about the true identity of the "God Killer" in *Wonder Woman* via semantic conflation of weapon and character. During the "call to adventure" catalyst event in *Wonder Woman*'s first act, when all of Themiscyra is under attack and only Diana among the Amazons can escape, her mother Antiope screams "God Killer! Diana, go!" While the film obviously invites viewers to interpret this line as a

suggestion that Diana escape and take the sword with her in order to use it to attempt to defeat Ares, this is only one possible interpretation of the audio audiences hear.

Feasible only when heard and not clarified visually with punctuation in writing, the other possible interpretation of this dialogue involves the clever disguise of the vocative grammatical case (as in, when one calls out to or speaks to someone else). “God Killer! Diana, go!” can thus be interpreted as Antiope calling out to Diana, *who is the God Killer*, rather than her exclamation referring to two separate entities: first to the sword, and then to Diana. The irony of this reading is that while the former interpretation is much likelier (and indeed, automatic, given the film’s substantive setup guiding the viewer in the direction of the deicidal otherworldly weapon), the latter is narratively accurate. In this moment, although neither Diana nor the viewer knows it, Antiope is using the vocative to call out to Diana as “God Killer.” Diana has no reason to know at this point in the film that she, not the sword, is the “God Killer,” though audiences can unpack the plethora of clues the film offers gesturing to the God Killer’s true identity and nature.

Throughout *Wonder Woman*’s first and second acts, Diana herself understands the "God Killer” gifted from Zeus to the Amazons to be the aforementioned sword, while dramatic irony operates for some viewers who have put together the clues about God Killer’s true identity. A major climactic reversal has occurs with the assassination of General Ludendorff, whom Diana suspects of being Ares in disguise, not bringing an end to the war and ensuring the salvation of humanity. This reveals to audiences that he was not actually Ares as the narrative set us up to believe, thus providing the first of several upsets to audience expectations. The film next unveils David Thlewis’ seemingly

harmless diplomat character Sir Patrick Morgan as the embodiment of the god of war. At the climax of the second act during a battle with Sir Patrick Morgan's newly revealed true form of Ares, Diana and the viewer simultaneously confirm the sword's actual impotence and irrelevance when Ares easily destroys it and creates a rupture in the expected narrative closure of the deicidal otherworldly weapon motif. This coincides with Ares' revelation of Diana to be the God Killer, the weapon that can save humanity from the wrath of Ares.

Wonder Woman simultaneously rejects the deicidal otherworldly weapon motif and endorses Diana Prince as a new, different sort of hero – she is a weapon in and of herself, but not one intended for violence. We might think of this conception of a "weapon" in the symbolic sense, just has we have metaphorically conflated Diana and a sword; she is more of a tool or even, in today's discourse, an activist. In this scene, Diana plunges the sword directly into Ares, believing she has struck a mortal blow with the weapon she imagines to be uniquely capable of killing this god. However, rather than the expected reaction his death or at least defeat, Ares holds his hand up and the sword disintegrates to the hilt. Not only has the sword not harmed Ares, but the god destroys it effortlessly, nonchalantly. Diana's surprise in this moment is a mouthpiece for the viewer's surprise, and in response to her shocked disbelief at the sword's destruction, Ares tells her: "The God Killer? Oh, child. That is not the god killer. You are. Only a god can kill another god." This reveal significantly augments the expected structure, which initially suggested a narrative about Diana training to become strong enough to wield God Killer against Ares, and then reverses this direction to suggest that not only is this particular sword an ineffective weapon against the god, but so are *all* weapons.

If viewers believe throughout the film that the sword is what will save everyone, and only Diana can wield it properly, it imposes a sense of militarism that fits in with the Amazonian training that occupies much of the early film. However, it is this shift to a non-violent approach that encourages (again, for both Diana and the viewer) a pacifist tact. Instead of the God Killer sword, shattered into dust by Ares, Diana must rely on her more traditional weapon, the Lasso of Hestia, or the Lasso of Truth.[95] A non-violent tool, the lasso enforces honesty in those caught in its grasp. In Diana's hands, it allows her — the actual God Killer — to destroy Ares permanently. If the film is accurate in explaining its own lore, then the idea that "only a god can kill a god" calls to question why any sort of weapon at all is needed, and why Diana's own power is not what ultimately defeats Ares.

Unlike the examples in Chapter 2, where an external object orientation gives way to recognition of internal power, *Wonder Women* refuses reliance on one object in favor of reliance on another. However, its refusal to participate fully in the deicidal otherworldly weapon motif does not mean *Wonder Woman* abstains from participation in other neomedieval weapon tropes. The film's ultimate preference for a weapon such as the Lasso of Truth in Diana's hands fits with other ways narratives deal with heroines' neomedieval weaponry, as a lasso is a much more fitting weapon in a woman's hands than a phallic weapon such as a sword, or so popular culture would have us believe. This shift also has another function: it reverses the film's position on militarism and violence

[95] Rope (and in the form of a lasso specifically) is not without its own symbolism. I want to acknowledge the cultural history of rope includes cattle herding and hanging/lynching, all of which contribute to its loaded symbolism as an object of entrapment and powerlessness. Its portrayal as a non-violent tool rather than a weapon like a sword may be the reverse to others, and is certainly complex. Rope now also has the additional significance of being used in BDSM, such as with shibari or bondage generally.

that it establishes in the earlier parts of the film. Further attempts by Diana to counter Ares's moves with swords, hammers, maces, and other instruments of violence all fail, because the film makes a point that to fight the god of war with destructive objects is a hapless endeavor. In other words, the film undermines its own training montage from the first part of the film, where Antiope demands that Hippolyta train Diana so that she is a better fighter than any other Amazon, including the queen herself. All this battle training becomes, in this moment, entirely irrelevant.

As we will see with the Avengers' narrative arc's main antagonist Thanos in the following sections, although Ares presents Diana with a vision of peace, it is a seeming peace obtained through destruction, oppression, and violence, a forced peace like those seen in many dystopian/speculative narratives. In opposition to Ares' and Thanos' nihilistic views on humanity and how to control their impact on the universe, Diana favors free will and sees the good in humanity as more powerful than their capacity for evil. This contrast evokes the age-old philosophical and ethical discourses surrounding the nature of humanity and its predisposition toward either good or evil. The rather despairing worldview demonstrated by Ares, wherein humanity must be destroyed, or at least controlled, in order to re-attain an everlasting peace, is the kind of rationale that often accompanies authoritarianism, ultra-nationalism, and neofascism in general. *Wonder Woman* thus offers viewers the hypothetical choice between an idyllic Earth devoid of those pesky humans whose evil actions are the bane of all entities and the reality of global conflict, poverty, and suffering caused by humanity having its free will. *Wonder Woman* decisively rejects the ecofascism of the former, and is hopefully about potential improvements to the latter.

In terms of the film's usage of the deicidal sword as motif for destabilizing generic conventions and upsetting audience expectations, *Wonder Woman*'s employment of the Godkiller both reinforces such conventions as a sort of cultural language common to narratives and also demonstrates the ability to reinvent and re-inscribe such elements with contemporary cultural ideals. In this case, the film's agenda does not support violence as an effective method for attaining peace, and it conveys this message with the unequivocal destruction of what the film itself describes as the ultimate weapon. Rather than violence, then, the film's conclusion embraces Diana's new mission statement that "only love can save the world."

"Are you the god of hammers?": Mjolnir, Heroic Masculinity, and the Avengers

In Norse mythology, Thor Odinson (son of Odin, the All-Father) is the god of thunder and wields a powerful warhammer called Mjolnir,[96] which Norse literature describes as being powerful enough to level mountains. The Norse pantheon, beyond its presence throughout medieval Germanic literature, also appears in many post-medieval popular works. One prominent example is Marvel's comic books, where Thor features as a major character. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Thor is the hero-protagonist of

[96] Mjolnir most obviously represents the "infallible sword" motif, which fittingly refers to a weapon that is indestructible, invincible, and offers some form of protection for the wielder. Often, infallible weapon analogues in popular media also demonstrate some form of power either unknown to or otherwise inaccessible to the hero that bears them.

several character-driven films[97] as well as appearing in the ensemble Avengers[98] films, among others.

In these narratives, Thor's hammer Mjolnir is an apt example of a weapon that participates in several popular sword motifs and which bears cultural significance as a legible extension of Thor's heroism. Beyond being a plot device, Mjolnir thus becomes a shorthand for Thor's heroic identity, and the ways we interpret Mjolnir can be extrapolated to make greater arguments about the cultural agenda of the films in which it appears. I aim to demonstrate in this section how Mjolnir as a heroic weapon functions instrumentally in identity formation and character development and acts rhetorically to affirm and castigate certain elements of heroic masculinity. While Steve Rogers features in the later *Avengers* examples as another hero who is worthy of wielding Mjolnir, this section will focus on Thor.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, constructions of masculine heroic ideals are perfectly suited to exploration in the superhero film, its characters hyperbolic by default. One aspect of masculinity that has become increasingly concerning in 21st century cultural discourse is toxic masculinity. An exemplary representation of this in popular culture is Gaston from Disney's animated film *Beauty and the Beast* whose hypermasculine traits the film comedically idealizes as a foil to the Beast's alternate forms of masculinity. Gaston's thick neck, intimidating stature and musculature, ability to expectorate, predilection for antler-centric interior design, and overall hairiness

[97] These include *Thor*, *Thor: The Dark World, Thor: Ragnarok*, and the recently released *Thor: Love and Thunder*.

[98] *The Avengers*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Avengers: Infinity War*, and *Avengers: Endgame*

are played up to the extreme. He is, as the titular song explains, "a man among men" and "the hero next door," desired and exalted by all (except Belle). The idea that all men want to be (like) Gaston and all women want to be with him demonstrates the masculine ideals that, in *Beauty and the Beast*'s case, represent a cautionary tale only to viewers who identify with Belle's ostensibly feminist worldview.

Feminism at its best should advocate for equity among all people regardless of gender, and thus feminist theory addresses masculinity especially as it relates to the perpetuation of patriarchy, misogyny, and other harmful ideologies. Like Gaston, the Thor we meet in his introductory film, *Thor*, is the strongman warrior type, a rash, arrogant, self-indulgent, individualistic, egotistical literal god who postures and boasts of his strength, has little humility or vulnerability, and resorts to violence and aggression rather than diplomacy. The warhammer Mjolnir acts rhetorically to invite the audience into an understanding not only of how Thor fits into the superhero narrative formula, but also to help demonstrate his individual character development. As with my previous discussions of *Aquaman* and *Wonder Woman*, Marvel's films employ neomedieval weapon motifs to enact their socio-cultural agenda, advocating for positive models of masculinity, condemning certain conservative ideals and their associated contemporary 21st century socio-political movements.

Mjolnir is a godly weapon, a hammer that acts as a figurative extension of Thor's physical body and metaphysical powers, the catalyst for and vehicle by which Thor accesses his power over thunder and lightning. In these ways, Mjolnir represents all four functions of the neomedieval weapon, demonstrating throughout the MCU its metonymic, authorizing, symbiotic, and agentic qualities with respect to its usual bearer,

Thor. When a heroic weapon comes to synecdochally represent its bearer, the integrity of the weapon also becomes symbolic of the heroic character's development and often functions symbiotically. Thus Mjolnir's destruction or loss, by extension, makes a statement about Thor himself — specifically, his worthiness and power. Alison Germaine introduced an argument about the relationship between disability, superhero identity, and Mjolnir in her essay "Disability and Depression in the *Thor* Comic Books,"[99] focusing on particular comic book iterations of Thor where Mjolnir and physical disability complicate the metonymic relationship between the weapon and wielder. My work here interacts with and complicates that idea by addressing the neomedieval functions of Mjolnir within the Marvel Cinematic Universe.[100]

The relationship between weapons and their wielders is an important one, and says a lot of about the characterization of the hero-protagonist. As we have seen throughout the project, the intimate relationship between heroes and their weapons is characteristic of many neomedieval fantasy narratives, and this is also true of the relationship between Thor and Mjolnir. Characterization involving vulnerability and intimacy are especially significant in conversations about masculinity because they are indications that a character is not displaying behaviors related to hyper- or toxic masculinity. In other words, we can see the intimacy between Thor and Mjolnir grow as Thor's character develops from a state of toxic masculinity to a more balanced, healthy

[99] Germaine, Alison, "Disability and Depression in *Thor* Comic Books," in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol 36, Issue 3: 2016.

[100] One major theoretical framework I believe would add to this dissertation's depth is disability studies, and if given time and energy to revise this work further, I would happily address such complexities. As it stands, the scope of the current work is unable to do justice to such nuanced issues.

form of masculinity. It is not just the weapon itself but also Thor's relationship to it that conveys to audiences how Thor's character develops. We could also read the intimate relationship between Thor and Mjolnir as the relationship between a cis-man and his penis, given how protective and proud of the hammer Thor is. This would not be a stretch, given the many sexual innuendos referring to Mjolnir throughout the MCU.

Mjolnir is a bit different than some of the other neomedieval weapons discussed in this dissertation in that it is not phallic (though still a traditionally "masculine" shaped object) but is *constantly* joked about as being representative of the phallus, more explicitly than any other example herein. It would be best compared to *Dr. Horrible's Sing Along Blog*'s main antagonist, Captain Hammer, who makes explicit this double entendre, at one point clarifying of his own chevron, "the hammer is my penis."[101] Certainly we also saw this in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* example, with the gesticulation of Buffy staking a vampire being humorously misinterpreted as a sex act. This metaphorical aspect of Mjolnir most obviously appears in a scene from *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, where several of the Avengers attempt to prove their "worthiness" by successfully lifting up Mjolnir as only Thor is able to do. Tony Stark (Iron Man) jokes that they will not hold it against Clint if he cannot "get it up," further reinforcing Mjolnir's phallic symbolism and significance as a metonym of heroic masculinity.

Mjolnir as a symbol of masculinity does not stand for all heroes, as evidenced in the *Age of Ultron* party scene when each of the Avengers attempts to lift the hammer. Whereas all the male Avengers make an attempt, the only female Avenger, Natasha

[101] Whedon, Joss. *Dr. Horrible's Sing Along Blog*, 2008.

Romanoff (Black Widow) declines to participate. She explains, "that's not a question I need answered." This reinforces the association between the phallic "measuring contest" metaphor and the trial of wielding Mjolnir. Natasha doesn't pursue Mjolnir for two reasons that we can infer: first, that she has no interest in validating or negating her own heroism by virtue of this kind of test, and second, that such a phallocentric symbol or marker simply *cannot* or does not interpellate her in the same way it does her male companions.[102] I will discuss in the final section of this chapter how the sexual metaphor becomes complicated in the most recent film, *Thor: Love and Thunder,* when Jane Foster takes up Mjolnir as her primary weapon. For now, though, let us note that Mjolnir seems to most clearly represent phallic masculinity, both comedically and dramatically.

This "dick-measuring contest" scene in *Age of Ultron* clearly demonstrates, in addition to its gendered aspects discussed above, how Mjolnir fulfills the authorizing and agentic functions of neomedieval weapons. As with the "conditions of use" we have discussed throughout this dissertation relating to the trial of obtaining or the ability to wield heroic weapons, the films make explicit exactly who may or may not carry the hammer. The 2011 film *Thor* depicts the teleology of Thor being deemed "not worthy" of Mjolnir and exiled to Earth without his powers, forced to prove himself and regain the ability to wield Mjolnir, thus restoring his power and status. By stripping Thor of his powers and sending his son (as well as the hammer) down to Earth, Odin's actions set up a very clear formula for the rest of the film's narrative, establishing the goal of Thor

[102] This has been the case with several of the examples with female heroic characters we've seen, such as with *Xena*'s circular chakram or with Lyra's alethiometer in comparison to Will's knife, and most recently with Wonder Woman's shift to the Lasso of Truth after the "God Killer" sword fails her. With Alanna, too, I demonstrated that once she fully embraces her femininity, the sword Lightning no longer serves as an adequate weapon for her as a relic of her masculine persona.

regaining his powers and reasserting his heroism as the expected climax. Odin declares upon casting his powerless son down to Earth without his hammer, "Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor." These are clear conditions of use, and like the inscription on the stone and anvil in Arthurian literature, it's an explicit set of rules by which the weapon and wielder may operate.

Fairly common to heroic narratives, *Thor* thus follows the pattern of the hero's journey made popular by Joseph Campbell in his deconstruction of the monomyth. As previously discussed, this pattern spans various genres, audience demographics, and media. A similar formula is established in Disney's *Hercules* where the titular demigod must prove his heroism in order to become worthy enough to enter Olympus. Both *Thor* and *Hercules* exemplify how heroic narratives set expectations for the audience: the protagonist's faults serve as a starting point, as viewers anticipate the heroic character the protagonist will develop into, and culminating in the achievement of whatever goal demonstrates this accomplishment as the end point of the narrative. In *Thor*, proving himself worthy (both to Mjolnir and to us, the audience) means demonstrating willingness to self-sacrifice and showing humility rather than the arrogance and immaturity for which he is originally punished. By thinking of others before himself, Thor proves that he is once again worthy to wield Mjolnir, putting the hammer (and his powers) finally within his grasp again.

The film (and the Avengers arc more generally) uses Thor's foster brother Loki Laufeyson as a foil and deuteragonist, contrasting with Thor's growth away from toxic masculinity while Loki himself grabs for power and pursues his own self-interests. *Thor* thus characterizes ideal heroism as compassionate, community focused, self-sacrificial,

and humble. Thor grows into a better version of himself, one that places the needs of the many above his own, and that values life and culture outside those in which he has a vested interest. The metric by which *Thor* achieves this argument about heroic masculinity is, of course, through the strategic use of the warhammer Mjolnir. Mjolnir represents both the authorizing and agentic functions here, able to authorize (or deauthorize) Thor as needed, and acting as an animate character able to recognize the progress the hero makes toward the end goal of being worthy. It is not Odin so much who decides when Thor is worthy, but rather Mjolnir itself.

Thor's audience is complicit in the film's construction of the hammer as an authorizing force, and we just as much as Mjolnir are invested in the work Thor does to establish a healthier masculine ethos. We buy into it because it seems to fit our understanding of how magical weapons in fantasy work – it follows the formula for neomedieval weapons we have come to expect in our cultural toolbox. At the beginning of *Thor*, when Odin casts Thor and Mjolnir out, we implicitly understand this as a catalyzing event that will change Thor from his arrogant, bellicose self into a hero worthy once again of wielding Mjolnir. At this moment in the film, the audience already knows Thor will earn back his hammer and with it, his powers.

The generic conventions of fantasy as well as superhero narratives are clear enough that even an audience not entirely familiar with the canon will recognize this formula and know how the film will progress before seeing it. It is that very expectation the audience has which allows such narratives to play outside the bounds of these conventions—it allows creators to step outside the traditional ideas of heroism as masculine dominance in physical strength and prowess, to make cases for other forms of

heroism, inventing new ways to play with the old stories. Audiences already know the basic formula, so media are free to use that to their advantage and invent new forms of said narrative. Thor is, predictably, able to earn back both his powers and the ability to wield Mjolnir thanks to his lessons learned on Earth and his burgeoning love for Jane Foster.

Negotiating the ideal of heroic masculinity via Mjolnir as an authorizing force calls into question the heroism of anyone who *cannot* wield it. In the aforementioned scene from *Age of Ultron*, Mjolnir is a tool for comedically appraising the heroism of each Avenger who in turn attempts to prove themselves worthy of being able to lift it. Various theories are proposed: that the hammer is somehow attuned to Thor's specific DNA via a "fingerprint" type authorization, or that using physics or sheer force of will can move it. First, Clint Barton (Hawkeye) tries to lift it, jokingly declaring "Whosoever be he worthy shall haveth the power," before ultimately failing to even budge the weapon from its resting place on the coffee table. Tony Stark (Iron Man) first tries using physics to attempt this "honest challenge," then when that fails, gets his Iron Man suit to use its power to assist him. When even that doesn't work, both he and Rhodes attempt to use two robotic suits to get the hammer off the table, which still fails. "So when I lift it, I then rule Asgard?" Tony confirms before clearly demonstrating he is not worthy of such a position. The Hulk tries (in his human form of Bruce Banner) but clearly his strength, which exceeds that of all the other Avengers combined, is not enough – or more precisely – not right for this particular challenge.

It is only when Steve Rogers (Captain America) makes his attempt, notably without prefacing it by any boasts or taunts, that we see the truth of this test – but then,

Steve's masculinity is much healthier, much more humble. A telltale squeak rings through the room as Steve pulls the hammer up, budging it just the slightest bit before giving up. The look of panic on Thor's face tells the audience everything they need to know in this moment, that Steve might be just as worthy as Thor, and that his kind of heroism stands parallel to that of a literal deity. This scene ends with Thor effortlessly picking up Mjolnir after various theories of the test's trickery are reiterated, and he counters them all saying, "I have a simpler one: you're all not worthy." Mjolnir in this scene judges only Thor of being worthy to wield it, and seems to suggest that Steve *might* one day be worthy, again demonstrating its authorizing and agentic functions.

Age of Ultron accordingly exploits the audience's complicity in this convention by enabling the newly created character Vision to hold Mjolnir. Since the above scene clearly re-established those conditions of use and demonstrated that most of the Avengers are not worthy of wielding such a weapon, the later scene effectively validates the created entity Vision as a "good guy" because he casually and easily lifts Mjolnir, immediately gaining the trust of the entire Avengers team. Vision's casual ability to lift the hammer even without knowing it presents an impossible challenge to everyone else but Thor is a way to show Vision's worthiness, to demonstrate that he is at worst neutral, and at best, more worthy than any of them (besides Thor). This proof offers us as the viewer as well as the entire Avengers team the evidence to believe in this new character Vision as one that will become heroic, demonstrated very clearly by the hammer Mjolnir as a test of goodness and worthiness.

This is a clear example of neomedievalism being used as a "shortcut," giving *Age of Ultron* a convenient and efficient way to get the audience to believe in a character

quickly. What is missing here is the fact that Vision, as an AI, doesn't really have gender; we could argue that Vision, as played by Paul Bettany, and who later enters into a heteronormative romantic relationship with Wanda Maximoff, demonstrates a tendency towards masculinity even if subconsciously. But regardless, Mjolnir does not serve as an authority of Vision's masculinity as it does for the rest of the Avengers team. Then again, this is perhaps because as an AI, Vision is not bound by cultural constraints around gender and has no need to conform to any form of masculine performativity.

The end of *Age of Ultron* returns to the phallic metaphor, as Tony Stark and Steve Rogers agree that because Vision is a machine and artificial, his ability to pick up Mjolnir does not count against them. Their inferiority complexes in this moment result from seeing another masculine force exceed them and thus they adjust the rules so that they can rationalize why and boost their egos in the process. Despite invalidating Vision's ability to hold Mjolnir against their own inadequacy, they all agree that the Mind Stone is safe in Vision's care *because* he has demonstrated his worthiness via Mjolnir. In this way, Mjolnir becomes both the metric by which they measure heroism while also rationalizing how it is insufficient as a metric.

In a sense, Iron Man and Captain America undermine their own statements in order to excuse their own perceived inadequacy – and one that has the trappings of toxic masculinity at heart. Despite this seemingly significant discussion, they end with a further humorous hypothetical: if you put Mjolnir in an elevator, would it still go up? And the answer, presented jokingly, is that the elevator is not worthy. Despite this outcome, we have repeatedly seen Thor placing Mjolnir on top of something to keep it pressed down, and this would likely also occur in an elevator. In summary, Marvel sets its own rules and

then proceeds to break them, sometimes for the sake of humor, other times for character development or narrative necessity. This results in frequent contradictions and mixed messaging, but Marvel is apt to use a joke as a throw-away line in one seen and then ret-con or undermine it in the next for the sake of plot integrity. This does not undo the significance of Mjolnir as a heroic signifier, but it does mean that viewers have to work harder to parse what matters when.

The existence of a team of superheroes like the Avengers with its members all being distinct and possessing different characteristics and powers (and thus representing different ideals!) negates the idea that there is only one way to be a hero in Marvel's films. Not all heroes will be considered valid by all authorizing forces, but that some, like Thor's, can be verified and marked *publicly* by weapons such as the warhammer Mjolnir. *Thor* and sequels are perhaps the most conventional in that they are the closest to neomedieval fantasy of any of the origin stories in the Avengers arc, so it is unsurprising that we such prevalence of neomedieval weapon motifs in those films. The authorizing and agentic functions that appear *Thor* and *Age of Ultron* also play a role in some of the later films, but for now I will turn to the symbiotic and metonymic functions and how they challenge heteronormativity and reframe heroic masculinity in *Ragnarok* and *Endgame*.

The relationship between Thor's heroism and the weapon that represents him/it becomes complicated in *Thor: Ragnarok*, presenting another crisis of heroism, and daring Thor to move beyond reliance on Mjolnir as a focus for his powers. In *Ragnarok*, Odin's first child and Thor's older sister Hela rises and sets into motion the titular Ragnarok, the foretold apocalypse presaging the destruction of Asgard. When Thor and Loki join forces

to ward off Hela's invasion, she shocks them both by effortlessly and abruptly shattering Mjolnir in the ensuing battle. Hela thus claims the throne in the wake of Odin's death and the momentary defeat of his other successors, ruling with an iron fist as she and Odin did when building their empire, aiming to transform Asgard back into the merciless imperialist seat of power of its origins.[103] As with the other weapons I've discussed, the symbiotic function of neomedieval weapons implies that the breakage of Mjolnir represents a similar breakage in Thor. Thor's weapon is broken, thus his crisis of confidence, and thus the narrative gives us an equally broken Thor, whose own physical prowess diminishes in the wake of this loss.

The destruction of Mjolnir creates a moment of clarity around Thor's heroism in *Ragnarok*. At the peak of his desperation, Thor feels helpless to defeat Hela and retake Asgard without the aid of his trusty hammer Mjolnir in hand. The spirit of Odin visits Thor and asks him the rhetorical question, "Are you Thor, god of hammers?" This

[103] An issue arises with the introduction of Hela as the first child of Odin, given the film's revelation that before Thor, Hela herself wielded Mjolnir. *Ragnarok* reveals how Hela assisted Odin in building the Asgardian Empire, employing Hela like a weapon against the other realms to bring them to heel. We might read Hela's mastery over Mjolnir (and her ability to destroy it) as complicating my argument about heroic wielders and weapons, because she is *not* heroic as we would expect someone who can wield Mjolnir to be given the "instructions of use" offered elsewhere in *Avengers* films.

However, I see this as rather supporting my argument that the heroic weapons in these narratives are making rhetorical moves as well as narrative ones, representing and reinforcing elements of social critique imbued in the narrative. In this case, Hela's mastery over Mjolnir is part of her imperial, colonial consciousness – the same consciousness that she exposes of Odin. She accuses him of hypocrisy, of being proud of his achievements and happy to sit on his throne even as he is ashamed of how he acquired it. That Odin, who seems able to set these conditions of use for Mjolnir, shifts from the value system of Hela to Thor parallels a social shift from a silent endorsement of imperial and colonial ideals to one of peace and community.

This is of course an imperfect parallel, especially given that Odin himself continues to benefit from his imperial conquests until his death. However, it seems that the imprisonment of Hela and uplifting of Thor as successor implies a change of heart and Odin's desire for the next ruler of Asgard to be morally distinct from his own historical rule. We can thus read Hela as a complication that in effect tests the value system of the Asgardians and ultimately, with *Ragnarok*'s inevitable destruction of Asgard, contends that a society built on imperialism simply cannot stand.

humorous question invites both Thor and the viewer to examine the relationship between Thor's heroism and the weapon he previously wielded. Odin answers his own question, telling his son "That hammer helped you control your power, focus it. But it was never the source of your strength."[104] "Are you Thor, god of hammers?" is thus a humorous reminder that power rarely resides solely in the objects themselves but is rather demonstrable of the power people give them. This is formulaically most similar to the example discussed from *Wonder Woman,* exemplifying how the true power is not held within the object but rather within the hero herself.

Thor's recognition of his power outside of Mjolnir is a short-term solution *Ragnarok* offers, with Thor pursuing a replacement weapon in *Avengers: Infinity War* that also fulfills many of the neomedieval weapon functions we might expect. Thor reaches out to legendary dwarven smith Eitri, whose forge on Nidavellir is the same place where Mjolnir was forged long before. Thor must perform an additional heroic feat in order to help forge another legendary weapon, and almost dies in the process. In the pivotal scene, Eitri pours the molten uru (an enchanted metal that can only be melted by the heat of a dying star) into a mold for an axe head. If we think back to Odin's remarks in *Ragnarok*, though, it calls into question why Thor seeks a replacement weapon in the first place. He doesn't *need* one to use his powers, and nearly dies trying to get this new

[104] There is an apparent contradiction present here, returning to the plot of *Thor* in which Odin banishes Thor to Earth, removing his powers and also casting out Mjolnir with the edict: "Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor" (*Thor*). In that case, it is Odin that removes his powers *and* his ability to wield Mjolnir, and it is only by becoming worthy once again *without* his powers that he is again able to wield Mjolnir and thus regain them. So, confusingly, in *Thor*, Mjolnir is literally the source of Thor's power by way of Odin's decree. However, once he has proven himself and achieves the heroic state he will retain for the remainder of the *Avengers* films, these powers do not reside within the hammer but rather Thor himself. He should thus be able to command thunder and lightning regardless of Mjolnir's status, but the crisis Hela manifests in *Ragnarok* causes Thor to lose faith in himself as a powerful god and as a hero.

one – we could see this as a plot hole, or a failure of the text to fully explain the motivations behind Thor's actions.

I suspect that the reason the narrative demands Thor procure a new weapon is based in conventions about male superheroes carrying weapons whereas female superheroes tend to *be* weapons. This isn't a hard and fast rule, but we tend to think about superheroes (excepting Superman, as an example) wielding foreboding weapons that match their physical prowess and convey to the audience "look at this big weapon I have, can't you see how powerful I am?" It's also convenient as it keeps Thor associated with a particular weapon type; Hawkeye has his bow, Captain America has his shield, Iron Man has his suits. The new axe seems to possess many of the same qualities as Mjolnir, including possessing agency enough to fly into Thor's outstretched hand even while he is unconscious and near death. While the viewer does not actually see it fly into Thor's hand on-screen, the implication is clear: with its forging, the new battle-axe Stormbreaker restores Thor to his full strength and reinstates his heroism, enabling him to contribute to the Avengers in their attempt to defeat main antagonist Thanos. Thor wields Stormbreaker for the remainder of *Infinity War*. Stormbreaker does not come with the conditions of use that Mjolnir does, nor do Thor's powers seem to rely on it; this is a major shift from the way Thor's relationship with Mjolnir works.

Despite his new weapon, the relationship between Thor and Mjolnir cannot be replicated by Stormbreaker. Even later, in the final *Avengers* film, *Endgame*, when Thor is reduced to a shadow of his former self (identified in the film by his unkempt, beer-bellied, self-deprecating portrayal), he is able to call Mjolnir to him when visiting Asgard in the past, exclaiming "I'm still worthy!" This Thor is something in between the Thor

from the beginning of *Thor* and the one at the end of *Ragnarok*; he is sullen, pessimistic, and self-deprecating. The pride in his appearance he previously took is no longer there, nor is his self-confidence. Thor is lost, but Mjolnir still recognizes in him the good he has done and the person inside that has grown. The character development that resulted in Thor becoming worthy of Mjolnir once again is not lost even as Thor loses himself. His masculinity is in flux as he tries to rediscovery who he is as both a man and a hero, but he does not fully revert to his brash immature self.

By the final battle in *Endgame,* Thor bears both Stormbreaker *and* Mjolnir. What is compelling for me in this first example is that Thor holds Stormbreaker, an axe and his more recently acquired weapon, in his main hand, whereas Mjolnir, the weapon we have just spent several movies watching accompany Thor's journey, is in his offhand. This is a clear sign that Thor has moved beyond Mjolnir as the focus for his godly powers, and that it no longer defines or interpellates him in the same way. Stormbreaker has effectively replaced his hammer, and Thor even uses it to behead Thanos early in *Endgame*. The revision of Thor's masculine ethos into one of maturity, humility, and community-mindedness culminates into him being an excellent leader and team player, neither of which he was before. He is able to share in the glory of his teammates and celebrate their successes as his own.

During the climactic battle scene in *Endgame*, viewers receive payoff for a piece of character development foreshadowed several films before that further reinforces Mjolnir's authorizing function. Viewers see Mjolnir hovering above the ground as if someone has called it to them. This is a familiar visual, one audiences have seen many times as the *Avengers* films have chosen to focus on the relationship between Thor and

Mjolnir. But in this case, this expectation is used against the viewer, holding them in anticipation until finally, a change from what they expect occurs. Instead of the hammer flying into Thor's hand, it flies to Steve Rogers – Captain America – who was nearly able to lift it in the party scene I described earlier from *Age of Ultron*. Even Thor is surprised by this occurrence, although when he realizes what has happened, he happily exclaims, "I knew it!" In the following battle between Thanos and Steve, the latter is actually able to wield Thor's lightning power, using Mjolnir to call it down and sending Thanos to the ground. This is a callback to the conditions of use originally given by Odin all the way back in *Thor*: "Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor," and indeed, Steve here proves himself worthy, and accordingly becomes able to wield Thor's lightning power. Steve's heroism, and the masculinity bound up in it, is the purest of the Avengers, making it unsurprising that he of all of them is able to wield Mjolnir.

Steve Rogers demonstrates again and again his ability to call the hammer into his hand and to use its lightning power as his own throughout the remainder of *Endgame*. Even when Steve's trusty Captain America shield breaks in this battle – his own chevron – he is able to use Mjolnir instead, which can also serve as a defensive weapon by spinning it so quickly that it forms a shield. Later in this battle, we see the solidification of Mjolnir as Steve's weapon and Stormbreaker as Thor's, when they fly into the other's respective hands and Thor says, "No, no, give me that. You take the little one." This demonstrates how thoroughly Thor has moved on from his reliance on Mjolnir and is secure in his new relationship with Stormbreaker instead. What is surprising here is that Thor reverts to choosing the bigger weapon, almost suggesting a reversion to a prowess-

based heroic masculinity. We could read it that way, which problematizes the argument here, or we could also interpret this as Thor choosing the weapon he got most recently.

In addition to destabilizing the formula and conventions related to this neomedieval weapon, *Endgame* also upsets the traditional resolution of the heroic journey with Thor not reclaiming his place as the king of Asgard. This happy ending of the hero denying ascension to a leadership position and instead fading into the background reverses our expectations of upholding an aristocratic ideal for the hero. *Endgame* denies viewers the closure of the rightful king reclaiming his heroic weapon and taking his throne, with Thor instead retreating into obscurity in favor of Valkyrie becoming king of New Asgard. As a reversal of audience expectations, this is particularly effective; Thor has come full circle and placed himself in exile. His weapon, Stormbreaker, is of little use while he plays video games and meditates, and this clearly identifies Thor as not being at the end of his heroic journey yet – there is growth still to come.

It is not until the most recent Marvel film *Thor: Love and Thunder*[105] that Thor's character development is able to progress, and this film complicates the relationship

[105] The plot of *Thor: Love and Thunder* is as follows. Gorr the God Butcher, a once-loyal worshipper of an uncaring god, goes on a vengeful quest to kill all deities after the death of his daughter, Love. Thor, adrift and alone with all his family now dead and still pining for scientist human ex-girlfriend Dr. Jane Foster, seeks purpose and to understand who he is as a man and a hero. When Gorr visits New Asgard to kill ruler King Valkyrie, Thor returns and joins the fight to muster an army strong enough to defeat the God Butcher and prevent him from killing any other deities with his deicidal otherworldly weapon the Necrosword, which is corrupting him to the point of his own destruction.

When he returns to his once-kingdom, Thor discovers that Jane has become the Mighty Thor and now wields a re-constituted Mjolnir. Jane's explanation that Mjolnir called out and put itself back together for her gives way to a revelation that she is dying of stage 4 cancer, and wants to go out fighting. As they pursue Gorr, who has kidnapped all of New Asgard's children, Thor and co. visit the legendary Omnipotent City where the universe's deities revel and feast in complete safety while their worshippers suffer. After the Greek god Zeus refuses their call for aid, they steal his legendary lightning bolt, Thunderbolt, and pursue Gorr the God Butcher who has taken the children to the Shadow Realm.

between Thor's heroic masculinity and his heroic weapon significantly. Waititi's film at its center is about the search for identity and purpose, a theme that resonates with its many heroic and anti-heroic characters, and which proves ripe for revisiting the development of Thor's masculine ethos.

Whereas throughout the earlier *Thor* and *Avengers* films, Mjolnir appears to represent the phallus, both *Ragnarok* and *Love and Thunder* treat Mjolnir like Thor's lover (well, ex-lover). In *Thor: Ragnarok*, for example, shortly after Hela destroys Mjolnir, Thor verbalizes his regret at not having Mjolnir once it is broken, and while the context of this revelation (gearing up in an armory for a gladiatorial battle) might suggest it is as simple as wishing he had a more powerful weapon, it is clear there is more at play. Thor admits, "I really wish I had my hammer. Quite unique. It was made from this special metal from the heart of a dying star. And when I spun it really, really fast, it gave me the ability to fly." He shares this feeling with a sense of sadness, and this gives the viewer the opportunity to consider how integral Mjolnir is to Thor's identity.

Double entendre presents an opportunity for both sexual innuendo and earnest description of the close relationship between Thor and Mjolnir in *Ragnarok*. As Thor explains the functions of Mjolnir to another of the gladiators, Korg misunderstands and exclaims, "Oh, my god! A hammer pulled you off?!" Though Thor corrects him,

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It turns out to be a trap to trick Thor into bringing Stormbreaker to him and enabling him to use the Bifrost as a key to Eternity, where he can make a wish of his choice. Expecting that Gorr will choose to kill all the gods, Thor pursues him alone while Jane receives treatment in the hospital and Valkyrie recovers from a near-mortal wound. In a pivotal moment when Thor seems to be at his breaking point, Jane chooses to sacrifice her own health and take Mjolnir, which has been sapping her strength and preventing her body from fighting the cancer, to try and save Thor. She dies, but they convince Gorr to wish for his daughter's resurrection instead, and after Gorr dies from the corruption, Thor raises Love himself, giving her Stormbreaker to wield while he returns to carrying his beloved Mjolnir.

explaining how Mjolnir could pull him off the ground and into flight, it fits well with the sexual innuendo that many of the weapons I've described in this project have shared, and which Mjolnir itself has participated in with the earlier *Avengers* films. When Thor laments, "Every time I threw it, it would always come back to me," Korg responds "It sounds like you had a very special and intimate relationship with this hammer and that losing it was almost comparable to losing a loved one." While played for laughs, it's also quite a legitimate characterization of this relationship that is so much more than wielder and weapon. The use of the word "intimate" definitely highlights how the line between wielder and weapon can be blurred. Such descriptions also encourage viewers to interpret Mjolnir as animate and fulfilling the agentic quality, acting as an equal partner to Thor and not just an object in his hand.

The recently released film *Thor: Love and Thunder* further reinforces characterization of this relationship as a partnership and of Mjolnir as a sort of lover or at least loved one. *Love and Thunder* complicates this by re-introducing Thor's actual human ex-girlfriend Dr. Jane Foster into the narrative. The relationship matrices of Thor and Jane, Thor and Mjolnir, Thor and Stormbreaker, and Jane and Mjolnir are all at play throughout this film, and highly complicate how we interpret the symbiotic and agentic qualities of neomedieval heroic weapons. As I have mentioned throughout this dissertation, sometimes we end up with complicated or even contradictory ways of interpreting the functions of neomedieval heroic weapons. This is one such case, and with as new as *Love and Thunder* is, these observations are preliminary and would require further exploration and resources to fully parse.

Mjolnir displays the agentic, authorizing, and symbiotic functions of neomedieval weapons with the character of Dr. Jane Foster in *Thor: Love and Thunder*. In this film, Jane hears Mjolnir calling out to her, so she visits New Asgard to find the hammer's disparate pieces on display, lifting slightly off the surface and trembling when she approaches. Later in the film, Jane appears as the Mighty Thor, a female version of Thor with a very similar costume style to Thor Odinson's, and wielding a reconstituted Mjolnir. We can understand through this depiction that Mjolnir called out to Jane (agentic); enabled her to transform into the Mighty Thor, public empowering and authorizing her as a superhero (authorizing); and repaired itself into its former shape of a warhammer, cracks and all, just as it imbues Jane with renewed strength while she battles[106] her stage four cancer (symbiotic).

While with other examples in this project, we have seen that imperfectly repaired weapons represent failure on the part of the hero or the need for further character development for them to be fully repaired. Mjolnir remains unstable throughout *Love and Thunder*, its shattered pieces from Hela's destruction in *Ragnarok* flying back together into the shape of the hammer, but its integrity is clearly imperfect. We might expect that this means it is a sub-par version of this weapon, but for the Mighty Thor, it actually serves a special purpose in battle. Rather than flying off as a solid object as Thor or Steve wielded it in previous movies, when Jane deploys the hammer as a projectile, the pieces split off and become exponentially more effective, as dozens of small fragments that retain the power of Mjolnir. These projectiles can then also reintegrate for Jane to wield

[106] The use of the words "fight" or "battle" here have a figurative as well as literal meaning, because just as Jane is literally fighting the shadow monsters summoned with the Necrosword by Gorr the God Butcher, so too is she figuratively "battling" her cancer.

Mjolnir like a hammer, though the cracks remain visible. This could perhaps be foreshadowing for Jane's cancer not really being cured although she maintains a powerful appearance on the surface, or perhaps it means that Jane's usage of the hammer cannot be the same as Thor or Steve because she is not a typically masculine hero. Regardless, this distinction in Mjolnir's visual rhetoric seems interpretively significant.

Thor's discovery that Mjolnir is now wielded by Jane reframes this relationship between Thor-Mjolnir, Thor-Stormbreaker, and Thor-Jane and reveals his intense jealously despite his apparent reconciliation to his new weapon and the destruction of his old one. After all, he seemed happy enough in *Endgame* when Steve Rogers began to wield Mjolnir instead, and actively chose Stormbreaker over it. Nevertheless, whenever Thor sees Jane wielding Mjolnir, it is clear that the film wants audiences to perceive his dominant reaction as a jealous one. Thor even tests whether he is still worthy of carrying the warhammer when Jane leaves it on a surface; he celebrates the fact that he is still worthy, but doesn't seem comfortable with the fact that Mjolnir chose to put itself back together for Jane but not when Thor needed it.

Stormbreaker, too, displays animate qualities and seems to demonstrate its own feelings of jealously. Whenever Thor eyes Mjolnir in Jane's hands, Stormbreaker hovers itself into view, humorously reminding Thor and the audience that he already has a heroic weapon. *Love and Thunder* also characterizes Stormbreaker as somewhat unstable, with its ability to summon and navigate the Bifrost causing Thor to fly into objects accidentally. This unreliability could easily be a demonstration of the symbiotic function of neomedieval weapons, in that Thor's voiceover from the beginning of the film speaks about not knowing who he is or where he belongs. This could translate into the weapon

that is supposed to be an extension of him as a man and a hero, causing Stormbreaker to be unreliable and unstable. Especially given that Jane's costume as the Mighty Thor replicated Thor's own, he appears to be at a crossroads in identity re-development and be unsure as to how to proceed.

The villain of *Love and Thunder*, Gorr the God-Butcher, wields the Necrosword: as exemplary an iteration of the deicidal otherworldly weapon as I have come across in popular heroic fantasy narratives. It is solely intended for killing gods (dei-cidal), and its relationship with its wielder is distinct from some of the other weapons we have discussed in this project. The Necrosword corrupts the wielder until it kills them, so there is an expiration date build into a weapon-wielder relationship in this case. As we saw with Alanna's sword Lightning in the previous chapter being reforged with the evil crystal sword, so too does Jane merge the pieces of a broken Necrosword with the fragments of the reconstituted Mjolnir. Once Mjolnir breaks the Necrosword, Jane prevents it from reforming itself by taking some of the pieces into Mjolnir itself. This is an interesting outcome, but a short-lived one, as this is the last time Jane wields Mjolnir before dying and viewers are unable to ascertain the weapon-related consequences of this action.

There is one particular scene in *Love and Thunder* that merits further discussion: before the climactic battle against Gorr the God Butcher, as Thor finds the kidnapped children and tries to rescue him, he realizes that the only way they will make it out is if the children serve as a kind of army. In an evocation of the language from the first *Thor* film when Odin cast his prideful son out and set the instructions for use of Mjolnir once he was worthy, Thor bestows on all the children of New Asgard "the power of Thor." He

casts his lightning power out and like chain lightning it works its way through the children, imbuing them all with his power of thunder. It's a humorous scene, with the children wielding their stuffed animals as weapons, shooting lightning beams from their eyes. But it also marks an important shift – Thor uses not Mjolnir, not Stormbreaker, but the stolen weapon of Zeus, Thunderbolt, to give these children his power. It's a strange move, and one that brings viewers distance from the intimacy the film has worked so hard to convince us exists between Thor and Mjolnir. The scene also reminds us, if humorously, that children should never be the intended users of weapons, and the destruction they wreak must remain restricted to fiction.

Love and Thunder depicts so many neomedieval weapon motifs and seems to be building off of previous understandings within the Marvel Cinematic Universe to complicate our interpretation of the hero's relationship with their heroic weapon. With Mjolnir, Stormbreaker, and the Necrosword, *Thor: Love and Thunder* demonstrates the many ways that neomedieval weapons have a language all their own and we as audiences have to work to interpret what they have to say. The final image we have in *Love and Thunder* is Thor raising Gorr the God Butcher's resurrected daughter Love, who wields Stormbreaker (which is as big as she is), while he carries a graffitied Mjolnir in his own hand. Mjolnir now bears an indelible pink and blue face across its fractures on one side, an iridescent rainbow plastic tassel wafting from the handle.

As an ultimate subversion of the toxic masculinity demonstrated by Thor in his origin story, Mjolnir as presented in this scene is a palimpsest representing all of Thor's complex life experiences. The hammer is broken, but reconstituted, with evidence of its shattering still visible. Mjolnir has taken a long journey from Hela to Thor to Earth back

to Thor, broken by Hela, retrieved in the past, called to Steve Rogers, its destroyed iteration restored by Jane Foster, and now is back to Thor's hand. It has been at many points the arbiter of worth, of heroism itself, a measure of masculine prowess and strength. And now, scribbled pink and blue with a tassel waving from its hilt as from the handlebar of a child's bicycle, it is marked it as something permanently changed -- by a child, a girl at that – and, as with the other symbiotic and metonymic examples throughout this project, it is an indication that Thor too is changed.

V. CONCLUSION; OR *STAR WARS* AND THE REJECTION OF THE GOOD/EVIL BINARY

Red, blue, or green. Until the prequel film *Attack of the Clones*, those were the only lightsaber colors to appear within the *Star Wars*[107] film canon.[108] With the introduction of Mace Windu's purple lightsaber, this brought the total lightsaber color options to four. Red, the only choice for Sith, always signifies the "evil" characters, the antagonists and deuteragonists of the film franchise, with blue and green (and unique to Mace Windu, purple) representing the Jedi, the protagonists and "good" heroic characters of the film and television series. The lightsaber is just that, a sword made of light and energy. It is a weapon that distinguishes itself from blades made of metal in its ability to auto-cauterize wounds, in the energetic rather than metallic noises of it scraping against other lightsabers and objects. Lightsabers are the weapon of the Jedi and the Sith, who are for all intents and purposes the equivalent of medieval knights within this universe. Lightsabers are thus an aristocratic, special weapon that indicates their bearers are not

[107] *Star Wars* is a space opera series of films, television shows, and novels of which the primary narrative arc is now called the "Skywalker Saga," referring to the heroic journey of Luke Skywalker. The prequel trilogy (*Episode I: The Phantom Menace, II: Attack of the Clones,* and *III: Revenge of the Sith*) featured the origin story of Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala, the parents of twins Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa. This was produced decades *after* the original trilogy (*Episode IV: A New Hope, V: The Empire Strikes Back,* and *VI: Return of the Jedi*), which told the story of Luke's Jedi training, battle against Darth Vader and the Empire, and discovery of his true parentage and family ties. The most recent trilogy, which I'll focus on in this section, includes *Episode VII: The Force Awakens, VIII: The Last Jedi,* and *IX: The Rise of Skywalker*, which examine Luke's failures as a mentor after his nephew Kylo Ren (born Ben Solo, Leia Organa and Han Solo's son) becomes a Sith lord and serves the Empire. As should be obvious simply from how many texts there are in the main visual canon, it would be impossible to fully discuss everything related to weapons and heroes in *Star Wars* here, so I have selected a small portion that will be a productive microcosm of the broader trends in recent *Star Wars* media.

[108] In addition to the lightsabers of the film series, neomedieval weapons motifs play out on *The Book of Boba Fett* as well as in *The Mandalorian,* both of which are Disney+ series (in addition to the briefly mentioned *Obi-Wan Kenobi)*. The Darksaber on *The Mandalorian* is perhaps the best example of this, but as it was just introduced at the end of the last season and the narrative involving it is incomplete, I will withhold judgment as to its ultimate significance and how *The Mandalorian* employs it strategically. Furthermore, neomedieval weapon motifs are so universal that there are innumerable examples that could be included here but for preservation of scope must be excluded or discussed only in brief.

mere brawlers or soldiers. Lightsabers are made and borne by those who train in the use of the Force, and their attunement to it allows for their creation and use of the weapon.

The creation of a working lightsaber is the culmination of the force-user's training, the rite of passage that marks their entry from student to teacher, from padawan to master. An individual's lightsaber is theirs and theirs alone, being attuned to them in the way of the Force and loyal to their call, like an unseen tether from owner to object. These were, anyway, the established conventions within the *Star Wars* films prior to the most recent trilogy. It is thus significant when the most recent *Star Wars* episodes, *The Force Awakens, The Last Jedi, and the Rise of Skywalker* problematize everything I have just outlined as defining the qualities of lightsabers. The J.J. Abrams and Rian Johnson-helmed trilogy attempts to re-envision the significance of the lightsaber in accordance with audience expectations of the weapon conventions it has espoused up to this point. To accomplish this, *Star Wars* employs inversions and subversions of the neomedieval weapon conventions that are established within the heroic fantasy genre, and I will demonstrate in this section how doing so adds nuance to our binary of heroism/villainy.

The lightsaber fulfills all the functions of the neomedieval weapon, being an object that publicly identifies and authorizes its bearer, especially through unique and particularly special variations, such as Mace Windu's purple lightsaber, the double-ended lightsaber of Darth Maul, or the more recent cross-guarded saber held by Kylo Ren. These weapons not only serve to authorize their bearers who by virtue of successfully creating them demonstrate the legitimacy and authority of their new status as a Jedi or Sith, but also act as metonyms for their bearers to publicly and symbolically identify them. This was displayed in the recent Disney+ series *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, as when

characters appeared on screen with circular-handled lightsabers strung across their backs, the figures became immediately recognizable as imperial inquisitors. The reason Samuel L. Jackson insisted on a purple lightsaber for his character in the prequel trilogy was a practical one: he wanted to be instantly recognizable in a crowd on screen. It's a logistical request, but one that works especially well given its basis in the history of metonymic heroic weapons in popular fantasy.

In the *Star Wars* universe, the structural integrity of the lightsaber often acts in symbiosis with the bearer, with the functionality (or lack thereof) of the weapon corroborating the heroic status of the bearer. This is where sexually explicit comparisons between swords and genitalia become particularly salient, with the breakage or fallibility of swords metaphorically implying a kind of castration or dysfunction. A prime example of this symbiotic function is in Kylo Ren's use of a broken kyber crystal to make his lightsaber, causing it to form a cross guard of light beams not for aesthetic or practical reasons, but because the flawed crystal refracts the saber out to both sides rather than only straight from the hilt as most blades do. This also causes the saber's beams to have a fuzzy, jagged quality to them that represents the chaos and precarity of Kylo Ren/Ben Solo's psyche within the narrative diegesis of *Episodes VII – IX*.

There is a quality of agency to lightsabers that is not explored fully in the recent trilogy but nevertheless offers audiences some gray areas to consider. In the climactic scene in *The Force Awakens*, a battle between the film's protagonist Rey and antagonist Kylo Ren invites the audience to consider the roles of lineage and destiny in the competition for lightsaber loyalty between these two characters. Both seek to call the lightsaber to them, and its choice to fly to Rey rather than Kylo Ren demonstrates this

agentic quality to the weapon itself, and its attunement to each character. In other words, just because a character made the saber doesn't mean it must retain loyalty to that person; in this scene, the saber goes to Rey who is untrained in the Force but nevertheless succeeds in wielding it (and the lightsaber as its conduit) against the weapon's maker.

I set up this section as being about disrupting or destabilizing the binary of good (Jedi) and evil (Sith) within the *Star Wars* universe, and the way in which we can see that is partially through the usage of neomedieval weapon motifs with lightsabers. Indeed, much of the recent trilogy attempts not only to exploit the conventions established in its preceding trilogies and surprise viewers who expect things to go exactly the same way as before, but also to challenge the expectations of the genre and franchise as a whole. Replicating similar storylines with altered outcomes demands audiences pay attention and consider how or why things might be different now. One of the major ways the recent *Star Wars* films do this is with the good/evil binary; Rey, the protagonist, seems to reject it entirely. She does not want to give up attachment as Luke claims she must in order to become a Jedi, nor does she believe that Kylo Ren is unredeemable. Instead, the film seems to be making an argument that there is a middle way, a shade of grey, in between what has been characterized as quite black and white.[109] Even as both Rey and Kylo Ren declare him a monster, we are asked to consider the truth of that statement.

[109] Darth Vader's return to the light just before his death is not the same as the situation I discuss here; the original trilogy is quite clear about his evilness and although in *Return of the Jedi*, Luke does spend time trying to convince him of his humanity and goodness, nowhere in the films of this grouping do they characterize the Sith as anything but evil as a whole. The individuals may have particular nuance to them, as Vader does in his desire to reconnect with his child or in his remorse on his deathbed, but the systemic belief that there is a pure evil group of people and a pure good to balance them out is much less nuanced than in the most recent entries into the Lucasverse.

Star Wars Episodes VII – IX offer a rejection of heroism as a concept in favor of continual, individual identity negotiation, something that is at odds with its grand heroic narratives that strongly adhere to Joseph Campbell's monomythic heroic journey structure. In *The Last Jedi*, Kylo Ren advises Ren, "Let the past die. Kill it if you have to. It's the only way to become what you're meant to be." We could read this as a rejection of traditional hegemonic ideals that have been brought forward in time from premodernity and universal mythic traditions, a desire to exist solely in the now. Additionally, with how intrinsically interrelated the concepts of lineage and legacy are to neomedieval weapon conventions, the desire to separate oneself from parentage and become a whole individual independent from that lineage can manifest as a rupture in the traditional way of things.

Indeed, Luke Skywalker decides to destroy the Jedi legacy entirely: "I'm ending all of this: the Tree, the Text, the Jedi… I'm gonna burn it down." There is damage in holding on to what was and refusing to change. Luke says, "So it is time for the Jedi Order to end," and the dead Master Yoda agrees, "Time it is. For you to look past a pile of old books." I want to make explicit the implications here for cultural narratives continuing to rely on the past as models for the present, and the danger of seeing the world in these rigid black and white structures. Yoda accordingly advises Luke to pass on not only his lessons of "strength, mastery, but weakness, folly, failure also."[110]

To demonstrate how the most recent trilogy of *Star Wars* films has opened up this conversation, I share a close reading of a scene from *The Last Jedi*, in which Rey

[110] Jack/Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* as a model might be the most appropriate comparison to gesture towards here as a potential model for what queer heroism could look like.

voluntarily offers herself up to Kylo Ren on his imperial cruiser, allowing herself to be bound and taken to his master Supreme Leader Snoke as Kylo Ren's prisoner. She tells him, "I feel the conflict in you. It's tearing you apart." Rey senses that although Kylo Ren is bringing her to his master to potentially be killed, he is not the villain most see him as, completely loyal to the dark side or pure evil. "Darkness rises, and light to meet it," Snoke tells them, reinforcing as expected the reliance on a good/evil binary to make sense of the universe. In this scene, the film shifts from two people, one good and one evil, to two people working together and negotiating their individual and relational identities.

In the scene, *The Last Jedi* uses the lightsabers as a way to negotiate this shift from two distinct paradigms to a muddied middle way. First, Rey uses the Force to pull her lightsaber towards her, and it comes, but then rather than flying into her hand as we would expect it, it flies in an arc around her and back to Snoke who casually replaces it next to him where it previously was confiscated. Next, Rey summons Kylo Ren's own lightsaber, and it *does* fly into her hands; watching Rey, who is a *protagonist* and supposedly a hero, wielding this red cross-guarded lightsaber seems to be the definition of queer use. Based on the conditions of use set forth within *Star Wars*, Rey is not an appropriate user of this lightsaber, and yet, here she is very much using it. This scene explicitly acknowledges and rejects the expected, the conventional, the legacy and lineage of its characters, in favor of a new model of Force heroism.

The climactic moment in which this rupture occurs is when Snoke narrates what Kylo Ren does; he is expected to kill Rey, and that is certainly one outcome we might expect possible given he kills his own father Han Solo in the previous film. But what

happens instead is a reversal of expectations. Snoke narrates to Rey what he perceives of Kylo Ren, whom he believes is adamant in his loyalty to the dark side: "I see his mind, I see his every intent. Yes. I see him turning the lightsaber to strike true. And now, foolish child, he ignites it, and kills his true enemy!" The audio and visual elements work together here to upset expectations. As Kylo Ren turns his lightsaber towards Rey, what Snoke accurately describes occurring, we the viewer *also* see Rey's lightsaber that Snoke has at his side turning to face him as well. Although Snoke expects when he says "he ignites it and kills his true enemy" for Kylo Ren to in fact kill Rey right in front of him, this has set up the expectation for the audience that Rey is *not* the true enemy and Kylo Ren has realized that. Just as we perceive this, the lightsaber activates and slices Snoke in half, floating through the air until it reaches Rey's hand. Kylo Ren has betrayed his master, killed him, and given the lightsaber back to Rey all in a moment without Snoke even realizing it.

Without a word, Rey and Kylo Ren turn back to back, trusting and protecting each other in the ensuing battle against the Supreme Leader's guards. The image of blue and red working together, in unison, is one that immediately destabilizes the binary of Jedi/Sith that the *Star Wars* films have worked so hard to establish. Together they take out the rest of the Guard, their bodies moving in tandem as though they are used to fighting together. When Kylo Ren is in grave danger with the final guard, Rey calls out to him and throws her lightsaber toward him, landing firmly in his hand before he activates it, the blade piercing right through the face of the guard holding him. To see this blue lightsaber once again in Kylo Ren's hands further reinforces the disruption to the good/evil, light/dark, Jedi/Sith binarism inherent in all the *Star Wars* films, and invites

audiences to consider for perhaps the first time not just whether Kylo Ren really is redeemable, but whether the entire binary of Jedi/Sith no longer holds. “It’s time to let old things die,” Kylo Ren proclaims, “Snoke. Skywalker. The Sith, the Jedi, the Rebels… let it all die.” He asks Rey to join him in bringing a new order to the galaxy, and Rey rejects him, though there is more to their story found in the conclusion to the trilogy, *The Rise of Skywalker.* But let us dwell on this idea of letting old things die for a moment.

The western neomedievalism from which most of these sword motifs that appear in popular heroic fantasy are drawn are based in ideals that we do not, as individuals, as a society, have to continue to uphold. The hero does not have to be who he is has been. The story can be different. What *The Last Jedi* does in terms of inviting us to break down this one binary (even if it cannot fully commit to doing so) is take the first step, like a harm reduction program rather than abstinence. If we can slowly, gradually change the narrative, learning from the past but choosing not to repeat it, we can tell better stories. Stories where people are not good or evil, but complicated. They make bad choices. They fail. And they can still be heroes. Similarly, we can ask of our cultural narratives to give us better representation than what we have been offered. I am not suggesting we stop using neomedieval sword motifs, and indeed, probably for the rest of my life every time I encounter a weapon I will think of this project. But we can change what they mean, and we can make them work for us. We can do better. Or, if not, we can always burn it all down.

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