



# Feminist Fantasy Literature

## The Written Version of Maria Nilson's Lecture

In her famous article "Why are Americans Afraid of Dragons?" Ursula LeGuin talks about how fantasy have been seen as escapism, and not as texts that talk about and criticize society, and how this idea is fundamentally wrong. Fantasy literature is a genre among all other genres that engage with society and let us think about the world. LeGuin ends the article with this: "It is by such statements as, 'Once upon a time there was a dragon', or 'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit' – it is by such beautiful non-facts that we fantastic human beings may arrive, in our peculiar fashion, at the truth", (LeGuin 1979:35). By reading fantasy, by imagining another kind of world, we can understand our own better.

This is a short lecture about feminist fantasy, about the lack of feminist fantasy, about how we now have many more texts that could be defined as feminist fantasy and about what feminist fantasy could/should/might be. As it is a short lecture, this is of course only an introduction. Please listen to the short introduction to gender theory as well that will give a background to concepts such as gender and feminism and the important term intersectionality that we will discuss when reading Sanna Lehtonen's article about Susan Price's novel *Ghostdance* (Lehtonen 2010).

For many, fantasy is equivalent with heroic fantasy and novels like J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. A kind of fantasy that very often portrays a rather reluctant young man who leaves behind everything that is familiar to go out in the world and save it from evil. This kind of fantasy (also found in, for example, books by Terry Brooks and David Gemmel) have many ingredients from the heroic tale. In Joseph Campbell's classic *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* from 1949, he coins the phrase monomyth and explains how the monomyth or heroic tales is constructed:

The standard part of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation – initiation –return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth. A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man, (Campbell 2003:30).

Before we go on, let me just say that even if Campbell's study is a classic one, it has been criticized. One of the points of this critique is that he has a very "western" approach to myth and ignores a lot of myths and tales from other parts of the world.

The hero is almost always male in the heroic tale. There might be a princess to rescue, or a mother that is left behind, but the main characters in the heroic tale are, for the most part, men. There might be a female foe in the form of an evil sorceress (who usually is seductive and quite sexy), but basically "a lot of guys". Even the "helpers", the sidekicks, those that aid the hero on his quest, are very often men. In her very satirical and quite funny guide to fantasy (and there is something very interesting about the fantasy genre where so many of its authors have no problem with ridiculing and laughing about genre stereotypes), *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*, Diana Wynne Jones gives the following information about the wise old man that will probably show up at some point during the hero's adventure.

He will be several hundred years old and will probably have a long white beard; this will give him the right to be bossy, smug, tiresomely philosophical, and infuriatingly secretive about all important facts, (Jones 2006: 122).

He might be called Merlin or Gandalf, but are, very often a man. There are exceptions of course. One example is David Edding's Belgard-books where Garion, the young hero is helped by both the sorcerer Belgarath, who does resemble what Jones describes, and a woman, Polgara, a strong older woman and one of my favorite characters ☺

What is feminist fantasy then? A few years ago, I was a guest at EuroCon, a European version of ComicCon (but a lot smaller) and I was part of a panel discussing feminist science fiction and fantasy. I remember saying: "We all love women killing men, with big swords, but it's not necessarily feminism". In order for a text to be called feminist, it needs to, in some way,

discuss and problematize femininity or/and masculinity, challenge norms and stereotypes and, most important of all, talk about power. You will find more on this in the short introduction to gender theory.

We can also ask us why it is important to talk about feminist fantasy. In the online text titled “Why is feminist fantasy important?” that is one of the texts that I want you to read in this module, Maria Turtchaninoff discusses the “label” feminist fiction and says: “As long as books about women who are active and complex are almost automatically regarded as feminist, then we need feminist literature”, (Turtchaninoff 2016). One day, hopefully, we won’t need the label.

Is then fantasy a “male” genre? There is, of course, another side of the story. In the interview with Maria Turtchaninoff, that you can find in the final module of this course that focuses on Nordic Fantasy, she points out that in fantasy aimed at a younger reader portrays a lot of strong young girls and women. The books she mentions that she also writes about in the article “10 Feminist Heroes in Fiction” are, for example, Tamora Pierce’s books about Alanna (the first is *Alanna: The First Adventure* 1983) and Diana Wynne Jones’ *Howl’s Moving Castle* 1986 books where we meet strong female protagonists but who were not around when I grew up as they start to appear in the 1980s and onwards. In their introduction to fantasy literature for children, Farah Mendlesohn and Michael Levy says that heroic fantasy in a way opened the doors for young female heroes. Before heroic fantasy became a part of children’s literature, most fantasy novels took place close to home, the characters generally never left the safe environment of their own home.

While the medievalist setting of Tolkienian fantasy superficially precluded women from important roles, it offered new possibilities to writers of fantasy for girls because it involved multiple heroes and a recognized role for sidekicks, and because, unlike other forms of fantasy prior to this, it took place almost entirely *outdoors*, the main locus for violent adventure and a place that had been previously regarded as out of bounds for many girls [...] (Levy & Mendlesohn 2016:140).

I think it is interesting that in fantasy aimed at a younger reader, heroic fantasy have had strong female protagonists.

From the 1980s and onwards, we have had an increase of female heroes in fantasy and I will give a few more examples later on. Pierce's Alanna is an interesting character, she is the hero who is accompanied by a black cat with violet eyes, she is allowed to grow up, fall in love, and have sex and, wait for it, actually menstruate and has to think about contraception. Before we move on, let's take a moment to talk about the Susan problem!

What is the Susan problem? Well, it's all about Susan Pevensie from C.S Lewis Narnia books. She, who has been an important character, is not present at the final battle. There is a rather vague explanation for this where she is said to be more interested in party invitations and lipstick than anything else. This has been a bit of controversy about how Lewis treats this character. J. K. Rowling has said: "There comes a point where Susan, who was the older girl, is lost to Narnia because she becomes interested in lipstick. She's become irreligious basically because she found sex. I have a big problem with that" (Wikipedia). There is even a short story by Neil Gaiman titled "The Problem of Susan".<sup>1</sup> Even if the Narnia-books are written in a different context and are today dated, the debate raises interesting questions about femininity, sex and agency.

We have already mentioned a few titles that might be seen as feminist fantasy and you will find a lot more in the texts you are required to read in this module. But let me just name a few more books to try and show how we can define this subgenre in different ways. One of the books I often ask my students to read is Ursula LeGuin's Earthsea Trilogy, where the first three books ( *A Wizard of Earthsea* 1968, *The Tombs of Atuan* 1971, *The Farthest Shore* 1971) have a rather stereotypical and traditional view on gender but discusses ethnicity in an interesting way. In 1990 LeGuin wrote a forth book, *Tehanu*, that focuses on gender and is very much an example of feminist fantasy at its best, but a lot of the discussion on power and hierarchies are visible also in first three books, that in a way develops into a feminist dialogue.

In the last decade, we have seen a lot of titles that are interesting from a feminist point of view. I am thinking about authors like Holly Black and Libba Bray, and I have just discovered Foz Meadows who writes queer fantasy. A trilogy I really enjoyed is Kristin Cashore's that

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<sup>1</sup> You can read it here: <http://grotesqueanddecadent.tumblr.com/post/21272759751/the-problem-of-susan-by-neil-gaiman>

begins with *Graceling* from 2008, that discusses gender, sex, abuse and power in a dark, yes, but thought provoking way.

If you go searching for feminist fantasy, for books that challenges stereotypical and traditional ideas about men/women, masculinities, femininities and power – you will find quite a few titles but there is still not a lot written about this if we compare it, with, for example, feminist science fiction. This might be because science fiction has been seen as a genre that in a much higher sense has been used to criticize society. Feminist science fiction with writers like Ursula LeGuin, Marge Piercy and Joanna Russ, were an important part of the second wave of feminism from the 1970s and onwards and we might not see the same thing with fantasy. In the article that is listed as “recommended reading” in this module, you will find Mark Bould’s and Sheryll Vint’s “Political Readings” from the collection *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* and they argue that all fantasy is political and give several examples of how certain authors have discussed political questions, like, for example, Octavia Butler in *Kindred*, who problematizes not only gender but also ethnicity and slavery in her novels.<sup>2</sup>

Before I wrap this short lecture up, I want to say a few things about the texts you are required to read for this module. You will read a short text by Maria Turtchaninoff on why feminist fantasy is important and I do recommend that you read her novel *Maresi* (but you don’t have to as that text is not available online). You will also read an article by Sanna Lehtonen, that I talk more about in the short introduction to gender theory. In this article, she discusses Susan Prices’ novel *Ghostdance*, and you will read the first chapter from that novel, that is available online. I have also asked you to read a short story by Meg Rosoff. Meg Rosoff is an Alma laureate. The Alma award is an equivalent for the Nobel Prize, but for authors of children’s literature. I would hesitate to call Rosoff a fantasy author, she has written in many different genres, but her novel *The Bride’s Farewell* 2009 can definitely be called both fantasy and feminist. On her webpage I found a short story about a young woman who has been tasked with looking after a dodo – and it is an interesting story to discuss and for all you Harry Potter fans – think about Hermione’s struggles to free the house elves when you read it!

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<sup>2</sup> If you want to read Octavia Butler’s very interesting short story “Blood Child”, you can do it here: [http://www.baen.com/Chapters/9781625791191/9781625791191\\_1.htm](http://www.baen.com/Chapters/9781625791191/9781625791191_1.htm)

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