

# **Damsels in Drag**

## **Crossdressing Adventurers in Medieval Literature and Modern Fantasy**

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# 1: Introduction

We like to think of ourselves as modern. As a species, we have achieved much that the average inhabitant of that foreign country that is the middle ages would have found unimaginable.<sup>1</sup> And yet, some things seem not to have changed at all in the last millennium. There are issues we face today that are striking in their similarities to the issues medieval authors dealt with in their writings. Much like theirs, our modern society has a number of built-in assumptions about human nature. One such assumption lies at the heart of this thesis: the belief that, when it comes to gender, two options are available, namely male or female, and that we are stuck with whichever one we get, for the rest of our lives.<sup>2</sup> This view on gender, often referred to as the binary model of gender, or the binary gender system, has come under fire in the last thirty-odd years, and we are beginning to see real-life consequences of the gender debates around the world.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, the binary gender system has proved to possess formidable roots, and it has been difficult to even open up the idea for discussion. While technology and philosophy may be advancing at a rapid pace, mentalities appear reluctant to keep up.

This is where literature comes in. Traditionally, literature has been the vanguard of new ideas, at once a playground and a testing ground for cultural changes. As such, gender has been a popular topic or theme to incorporate in narratives, and not just in recent years. Even in the middle ages, various authors have raised their own questions about the rigid, static view of gender. There are numerous legends, poems, and romances that deal with crossdressing characters, adventurers who dress, act, and in some cases (as will be discussed) must think like members of the opposite sex. These characters change their genders, assuming a new set of “stylized repetitions of acts”.<sup>4</sup> I have found that tales like these bear significant resemblances to a more modern set of literature. In modern fantasy novels, the crossdressing adventurer is not an uncommon sight. Their tales, both in style and structure, are very similar to those of their medieval forebears.

In the following pages, I will argue that the issue of the assumed binarity of gender has been something humans have been struggling with since well before the term “gender” was first used – by a matter of centuries, in fact. By way of close readings and a comparative analysis, I will show that different authors have tested, explored, and even challenged the binary view. I will also demonstrate that this is something that is still happening, and in much the same way as in the middle ages. By doing this, I hope to show that the concept of gender

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<sup>1</sup> I refer here to L.P. Hartley, who in *The Go-Between* (1953) wrote a sentence that has become famous amongst historians: “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”

<sup>2</sup> In the pages that are to follow, I consider “gender” to be what Judith Butler described in her “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (1988). In this article, Butler defined gender as “an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (p. 519, original italics). This will serve as my working definition. Performance, it should be noted, is here seen as a critical component of gender.

<sup>3</sup> Utrecht University, for example, is scheduled to begin a trial with gender-neutral bathrooms before the summer of 2018.

<sup>4</sup> See note 2.

fluidity, an alternative to the binary gender view, is not the exclusive property of our modern society.

The question at the core of this discussion is the following: how does modern fantasy relate to medieval narratives in their representation of crossdressing adventurers, and what does this say about the exploration of gender binarity? To be able to find an answer, a clear understanding of the question is required first. Why do I ask this specific question, and why do I choose to compare modern fantasy literature with sources from the medieval period?

The first question has already been discussed in brief. I ask this question in order to explore the early forms of gender fluidity in medieval literature, and to highlight instances of gender binarity being challenged. Gender fluidity constitutes the idea that gender is not rigid or fixed, but flexible. Whereas in the binary view, gender can be represented as a switch, which is set either to male or female around the time of birth (or, in this modern age, well before that), gender fluidity posits that gender can be seen as a scale, with a masculine and a feminine extreme. Throughout our lives, we can freely move along this scale, changing our gender when the need or desire arises. There are an infinite number of positions between the two extremes, and no one is tied to any of them. This view, while increasingly popular, has by no means been fully accepted. Gender binarity has been engraved in our cultural memory. By virtue of having been the dominant view for centuries, it has been accepted as “natural”.

In this thesis, I hope to show that it is not. It is simply one possible way to conceive of gender, and one that has had people testing and challenging it as far back as the middle ages. By doing this, I hope to add fresh fuel to the metaphorical fire that is the scientific gender debate, but also to produce findings that can be used in a broader sense, outside academia.

The inclusion of fantasy literature in my body of sources is unconventional, and therefore all the more suited to my purpose. Few people would benefit from another rehashing of old arguments, which is why I will approach the issue from an unusual direction: the intersection between medieval literature and modern fantasy. My argument rests of the conviction that there is such an intersection, and in fact that these two categories of literature have far more in common than may commonly be assumed. Luckily, I am not the first to make this connection, and some of the existing literature on this topic will be discussed in the next chapter. Due to the similarities between medieval narratives and modern fantasy literature, one can focus all the more easily on specific topics, like crossdressing adventurers and the exploration of gender binarity. This means that a comparative analysis based on close readings of sources from both categories would be an excellent and straightforward approach to answer the central research question I have presented. One of the scholars who will be mentioned with some frequency in the next chapter, Erika Hess, has provided a compelling argument for this approach. In a similar project, she has argued that “chronological and geographical distance” between narratives “offers insights into the variable construction of sex and gender within differing cultures and at different historical moments. That the cultural values of sex and gender do vary further affirms their constructedness”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hess, p. 42.

Earlier discussions about crossdressing characters in medieval literature are plentiful, and will be referred to whenever they may be of use.<sup>6</sup> Gender in fantasy literature is less well-documented, but that can be said about the fantasy genre in general. Still, some scholars have looked at isolated cases and discussed their findings. To my knowledge, however, no one has as yet written a comparative analysis featuring sources from both categories.<sup>7</sup> Much of the reasoning for my doing so now has already been mentioned, but there is also the added value of the general approach. By comparing the representation of crossdressing characters in both groupings, I hope to demonstrate clearly that there is not a single, isolated group of people which question the status of the binary view of gender, but a multitude of people from various backgrounds, eras, cultures, traditions, and reading communities. This, I hope, will show that there is something within us all that drives us to question the binary view of gender (in some, of course, more strongly than in others). While this idea is not in itself novel, a discussion that approaches the issue from this particular angle could help us reflect on modern culture in a refreshing way. It illustrates that humans have been struggling with the conventional view of gender for much longer than most people realize. My hypothesis, then, is that there will not be all that many differences between the representations of the various crossdressing adventurers that will be discussed in the pages to follow. Because in all cases, the authors are dealing with the same topic: they are all exploring gender in a binary system. Of course, they do so in their own ways, informed and in part shaped by their own cultural contexts. Regardless of this fact, I fully expect the similarities to outweigh the differences that will turn up. In fact, I expect similar narratives to keep appearing, in a multitude of different forms, as long as gender binarity remains the dominant way of viewing gender.

Having now explain what I will be doing, and why, the only question that remains before I can truly begin is “how?” The first step is to survey the field, to explore what has already been written on the subject. This will be the focus of chapter 2, wherein I will discuss existing ideas about crossdressing narratives, both in the context of medieval literature and in modern works. In doing so, I will build up a theoretical framework, on which this discussion can expand. Part of this framework will be concerned with the relation between the medieval and modern fantasy, based in no small part on the work of Flo Keyes, a professor of literature from the United States.

With this framework in place, I can begin to apply the theories gathered to the two groups of sources I have selected. I will discuss these texts in greater detail below, but a brief introduction of them is in order. The medieval text that will feature most prominently, and the one which first set me on the track that lead to this project, is *Le Roman de Silence*, a thirteenth-century *roman* about a girl, Silence, who is raised as a boy. She (or he, depending on which part of the tale you refer to) grows up to be a famous minstrel, courtier, knight, war leader, and finally queen.<sup>8</sup> Other narratives that will feature are the Norse *þrymskviða*, in

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<sup>6</sup> A more in-depth discussion of the secondary sources used will follow.

<sup>7</sup> Hess comes close with her *Literary Hybrids* (2003), but uses modern general fiction, instead of fantasy. Her project, furthermore, has a more narrow focus than this present one, using only one modern and one medieval source.

<sup>8</sup> Pronouns have been a considerable puzzle in the writing of this thesis. I will discuss this problem at

which the gods Thor and Loki dress as women, and a number of early hagiographies, biographies of female saints, who all dress as men, for their own reasons. The most prominent saints of this group are Thecla and Eugenia/Eugene.

From the selection of modern works, Robin Hobb's *Fitz and the Fool* trilogy will feature prominently, for the simple reason that we are dealing here with three whole novels, rather than one or even a section of one, as is the case with the other case studies. The trilogy is full of crossdressing characters, both in leading and supporting roles, and performance is a central theme in all three books (as well, I have been told, in the other series that precede this trilogy). Terry Pratchett's *Monstrous Regiment* is an interesting counterpart to the Norse mythological text I will discuss, because both are humorous or farcical in nature. This text deals with an entire regiment of crossdressing soldiers. The last modern novel, one that can hardly be left out, is Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. I will be looking specifically at the scenes dealing with Éowyn's crossdressing, which puts her in a position to defeat the Witch-king of Angmar, who according to ancient prophecy no living man can slay.

To spare the reader, and to more easily get to the points that matter without losing myself in details, I will not discuss each text individually. Instead, I have chosen to structure my discussion along three different themes: Gender Indicators, Dramatic Irony, and Identity Construction.<sup>9</sup> For each theme, one of the medieval sources will serve as key text. This key text will generally be the one with which the workings of the specific theme can be best illustrated. Following a discussion of the key text and the way the theme functions therein, I can then compare and contrast my findings with both the other medieval texts, and the modern fantasy novels. How is each theme used in the medieval texts, and how does that relate to the modern novels? Are these themes used in a different way, the same, or are they perhaps completely absent on one side of the comparison? As mentioned before, a comparative analysis, based on close readings of the different sources, is the approach that is most likely to provide a clear answer to the central research question. By putting the data uncovered in the discussion of the three themes side by side, and reflecting on the various differences and similarities, I can discuss the representation of the various crossdressing adventurers, both modern and medieval, in the appropriate level of detail.

And now to return to the sources. I have briefly mentioned them all, but in the following section, I will introduce them in more detail, and explain why I have chosen to include them.

*Le Roman de Silence*, authored by the otherwise unknown Heldris de Cornouaille, survives in a single manuscript, rediscovered only in 1911 in a dusty box marked as "old paper". It takes up folios 188 r. to 223 v. of the manuscript WLC.LM.6 (previously Mi.LM.6), which is currently owned by the University of Nottingham. The codex contains a number of other narratives, like the *Roman de Troie* and the *Vengeance Raguidel*. It contains several illustrations (87, according to the Arthurian Fiction database), a small number of which

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greater length under the heading "A note on pronouns" in chapter 3.

<sup>9</sup> The choice of themes will be explained in detail when they become relevant, which is to say in the introduction to the analysis, chapter 3.

pertaining to *Le Roman de Silence* itself.<sup>10</sup> The first modern edition, by Lewis Thorpe, was not published for another sixty years, in 1972. Sarah Roche-Mahdi, the editor of one of the more recent publications, traces the Old-French manuscript back to ca. 1286, where she believes it may have belonged to a noblewoman, Beatrice de Gavre.<sup>11</sup> It came to England somewhere during the Hundred Years' War, and then goes missing until the beginning of the twentieth century. The text goes to psychological depths that are uncommon for crossdressing narratives, and, while some aspects seem to confirm traditional gender roles, many of those textual elements can be read ironically. Others appear outright subversive. Unsurprisingly, much of the literature available on the *Roman* falls in the domain of gender studies. The complete corpus of literature on the text is still relatively small, due to the fairly recent publication of the first edition. However, many intriguing points have already been raised, some of which will feature in my analysis.

The *Þrymskviða* is part of the *Poetic Edda*, a collection of Old Norse poems often dated to roughly the tenth century. I have included this text because it represents the more broadly spread tradition of farcical crossdressing, wherein very manly men (or in this case, gods) must clad themselves in female garb in order to gain entrance to some place.<sup>12</sup> Often, this is done with the intention of getting to a damsel, but in this case Thor does it to reclaim Mjölnir, his hammer. Male-to-female crossdressing narratives like these often take a far more conservative tone than *Le Roman* does. This will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

The various saints' lives included in this discussion have been selected because they provide a potential origin of the motif – especially in the case of Thecla's legend.<sup>13</sup> These texts offer an interesting counterpoint to Heldris' *Roman*, in that in almost all cases the act of crossdressing is very pragmatic. It has more to do with disguises than with identity. This differentiation will be a primary theme in the discussion that is to follow, and as such these texts appear to be an excellent addition to the body of source material. The life of Saint Thecla is discussed in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, part of the New Testament Apocrypha. Eugenia/Eugene's legend is part of the *Golden Legend*.

As to the modern sources, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (published in three parts, in 1954 and '55) is an obvious choice. Of course, Tolkien has a place of honour in the fantasy genre, of which he is often said to be the father. He is one of the most well-represented fantasy authors in scholarship. All these things make him an easy pick. I will focus exclusively on the chapters dealing with Éowyn and her crossdressing, which follows similar lines as both the saintly tradition, and the life of Silence. Because these two medieval sources are very

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<sup>10</sup> *Arthurian Fiction in medieval Europe: Narratives and Manuscripts*. See appendix 3 for more information.

<sup>11</sup> Roche-Mahdi, p. xxiii.

<sup>12</sup> Examples are *Meraugis de Portlequez* (c. 1220), *The Book of Sir Tristram* by Malory (1485), and the *Fabliau Trubert* (c. 1270).

<sup>13</sup> *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* is one of, if not the oldest Christian legend dealing with crossdressing saints. John Anson's "The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism" (1974) provides an in-depth analysis of this and other similar tales. I will return to this source and discuss it at greater length in chapter 4: Gender Indicators.



different, it will be interesting to compare Éowyn to Silence and her saintly counterparts, to see with whom she has more in common.

Pratchett's work is often seen as a parody on the whole fantasy genre. His *Monstrous Regiment* (2003) is no exception, making clever use of tropes of the genre to deliver a charged message on gender. Because of its farcical nature, it proves an interesting counterpart to the Old Norse poem about Thor and Loki. As I will discuss in the chapter on dramatic irony, this story uses the same techniques that makes the *Þrymskviða* so conservative, but with a twist that turns the whole novel into a humorous criticism of gender binarity. Again, because this work can be connected to various of the medieval sources, it will be interesting to see which work it has most in common with, and how it echoes ideas from both works.

The last of the modern sources is the complete *Fitz and the Fool* trilogy, by Robin Hobb (2014, '15, and '17). As in *Monstrous Regiment*, the three novels in question (*Fool's Assassin*, *Fool's Quest*, *Assassin's Fate*) present us with a considerable number of crossdressing characters. Unlike it, however, the trilogy takes a more serious tone when it comes to gender and crossdressing, showing strong parallels with *Le Roman de Silence*, down to the naming conventions used for crossdressing characters. Because of the scope and scale of the trilogy, it makes for an excellent final case study.

## 2: Framework

Crossdressing as a literary motif has been studied and discussed by many different scholars and in many different contexts. In the following chapter, I will give a synthesis of the research most relevant to the present discussion. This will establish a theoretical framework, a context for this thesis to exist in, providing it with touchstones and a way to connect to the current scientific debate.

The motif of the crossdressing adventurer as it exists today can be seen as a convergence of two different streams. It combines aspects from two traditions: the transvestite saints from early hagiography, and the Amazons of Greek mythology.<sup>14</sup>

There are many medieval tales that tell of women who dress as men in order to become monks, clerics, or otherwise follow the word of their god in a way that would not be available to women in their time. The *Legenda Aurea* provides numerous examples, such as the saints Pelagia, Eugenia, and Marina. Of primary importance to us is saint Thecla.<sup>15</sup> According to John Anson, this is the most likely “original form of the female saint in disguise”.<sup>16</sup> While the use of the term “original” is always problematic when it comes to medieval sources (who knows how much has been lost, or which orally transmitted tales were never written down at all), we can accept that this is at least one of the oldest known instances of the motif of the crossdressing female saint, having been written no later than c. 190.<sup>17</sup> The tradition, whether it began with Thecla or not, encompasses a wide selection of legends of women dressing, and, to some extent, behaving as men would, for various reasons.<sup>18</sup>

The phrase “to some extent” is key here, because one element of typically masculine behaviour is still missing. The legends naturally express Christian values. As such, there is little room for demonstrations of aggression and military prowess, an essential element in later crossdressing narratives. This is where the tales of the Amazons come in.

The focus on military might is not arbitrary, as it was and still is frequently seen as the pinnacle of masculinity.<sup>19</sup> In *Amazons and Military Maids* (1989), Julie Wheelwright discusses many historical female crossdressers, predominantly soldiers and sailors. She traces the story of the female soldier back to the fabled tribe of warrior women from Greek mythology, the Amazons, whom she describes as “a tribe of Syrian women who vowed to defend themselves

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<sup>14</sup> I do not intend to argue that at one point, the two traditions were consciously merged to create the motif of the crossdressing adventurer, but rather that the sources I will discuss show elements reminiscent of both narrative traditions.

<sup>15</sup> The life of Saint Thecla is discussed in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, part of the New Testament Apocrypha.

<sup>16</sup> Anson, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> This early date of course means that the legend of saint Thecla is not medieval. I have chosen to include it regardless of that fact, because it is the earliest version we have of a type of legend that did circulate in the middle ages. As will be demonstrated soon, Thecla’s tale does not differ much from the other hagiographies.

<sup>18</sup> I will discuss common motivations, as well as the differences in motivation between male and female crossdressers, later in this chapter. The legends themselves will be discussed in greater detail in the analysis.

<sup>19</sup> Wheelwright, p. 78.

and to forsake marriage when their husbands were killed and they were driven from their homeland".<sup>20</sup> Combine the prowess of the Amazons with the crossdressing of saints like Thecla, and you arrive at the archetype of the female crossdressing adventurer: a woman or girl who, in the guise of a man, goes out into the world and proves herself equal or even superior to every man she encounters, be he minstrel or knight, magician or king. As Wheelwright attests, the real-life examples of stories like these are plentiful.<sup>21</sup> Of greater interest to this discussion, however, are the examples found in literature.

Here, too, there are plenty of sources to pick from, both medieval and modern. In *Literary Hybrids*, a study already mentioned in the introduction, Erika Hess argues that especially in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, crossdressing narratives were not at all rare.<sup>22</sup> Fantasy has embraced the motif as well (as will become apparent in the analysis), but even in children's literature the motif appears with some regularity.<sup>23</sup> In academic discourse, it is a "hot topic".<sup>24</sup> Yet, as Hess has pointed out, "in spite of the contemporary fascination with cross-dressing, scholars and experts do not agree on the definition of the phenomenon".<sup>25</sup> The fascination is not unexpected, she continues, because crossdressing narratives can be of great help in challenging the outdated rhetoric of gender binarity.<sup>26</sup> The issue of definition stems from the fact that there are many different forms of crossdressing. Because these different forms are so diverse, the issue of definition becomes important. In my research, I have found three main categories of crossdressing. In some contexts, crossdressing can be a sexually charged act, sometimes related to prostitution. This form of crossdressing is of little relevance in this discussion.<sup>27</sup> The other two forms are more closely related, and therefore more difficult to separate. One form centres on disguising oneself, often in order to escape, infiltrate, or travel in safety. In many stories, the act of crossdressing is presented as a pragmatic solution to a problem. In other tales, it grows into something more deeply related to the character's identity. This is the second form, wherein the act of crossdressing serves not merely as a pragmatic escape- or infiltration tactic, but as a vessel for the exploration of the self. None of my sources start out like this, but many present their reader with a process of growth, where the characters do not merely solve a problem by disguising themselves, but learn more about who they are through the act of crossdressing. One form is as much crossdressing as the other, but, as stated, these last two forms differ significantly in objective. Both kinds of narratives will be used in the analysis, precisely because the different ways of exploring gender exposed here are one of the key themes of this discussion. Crossdressing here simply means "to dress as is common for the other sex". It is a tool in the exploration of gender, both for the person or character in question, and for the

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<sup>20</sup> Wheelwright, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> ---, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Hess, p. 45.

<sup>23</sup> Flanagan, p. 78.

<sup>24</sup> Hess, p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> Idem.

<sup>26</sup> ---, p. 46.

<sup>27</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the subject, see for example Hess' *Literary Hybrids* or Gilbert's "Costumes of the mind".

(academic) observer. I will return to this, in great detail, in the upcoming analysis, starting in chapter 3.

Crossdressing adventurers are fascinating, or so both academia and popular culture seem to agree, because they can challenge, empower, and emancipate. "For centuries", Wheelwright argues, "the female warrior heroine lived as a popular figure of emancipation, without any ability to transform the lives of other women. It was a momentary, deeply-felt rebellion that could reach out to other women only through their imaginations, compelling them to rethink their own lives".<sup>28</sup> Maria Nikolajeva, a scholar of children's literature, echoes the same statement, adding that especially for young girls, narratives like these can be paramount sources of inspiration and empowerment.<sup>29</sup> Wheelwright's tone is sombre, and "to rethink their own lives" is offered almost as a consolation prize. I would attest that she undersells the importance of this, and that making people rethink their own lives is one of literature's greatest strengths, and one of the most fundamental ways in which literature can affect a society.

One of the key ways of differentiating between the two kinds of crossdressing that lie at the heart of the discussion, is to look at what drives the character to (continue to) crossdress. Barring the kind of narratives in which crossdressing serves as a jest, in almost all cases the motivation of the crossdresser is significant. After all, crossdressing comes with risks. As Ad Putter has pointed out in his "Transvestite Knights in Medieval Life and Literature": "To many medieval minds, cross-dressing meant more than blurring the distinction between men and women: they realized that once that distinction collapsed, other cultural divisions legitimized by it were likely to follow." And as such, "transvestitism posed a threat to the order of clerics and laymen".<sup>30</sup> In other words, Putter argues that in most medieval settings, the binary gender division was a given, an absolute, something solid enough to form part of the very fundament of the social order. Blurring the hard line between masculine and feminine was therefore dangerous. This meant, naturally, that many authorities drew up legislature to forbid it.<sup>31</sup> This is the backdrop against which many of the crossdressing narratives were written. While it is seldom mentioned explicitly, it is an important factor to the narratives, as it allows us to better understand the severity of the characters' actions, and the risks they are willing to take to reach their goals.

What, then, are those goals? If crossdressing was an offence (in one way or another), why are both history and literature rife with examples of people doing it?

Before turning to contemplate this question, it is important to note that for male crossdressers, the answer tends to be something vastly different than for their female counterparts. In most medieval narratives that tell of men (often knights) in women's dress,

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<sup>28</sup> Wheelwright, p. 159.

<sup>29</sup> Nikolajeva, p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> Putter, p. 281.

<sup>31</sup> Odak, p. 41. The type of legislation differed from territory to territory, of course. Stipe Odak mentions that the Spanish state was particularly strict in this regard, whereas in England it was more a matter of social law.

the most straightforward interpretation is about as conservative as it gets. Texts such as these are often humorous or even farcical in nature.<sup>32</sup> Putter explains this as follows:

This, no doubt, is how medieval romances want us to treat knights in drag: as a joke. In the figure of the transvestite knight, medieval romance shows us not how indistinguishable men and women can sometimes be, but how different they are from each other and how preposterous, therefore, is the idea of someone trying to be both at the same time. Behind the transvestite joke thus lies a deep conservatism.<sup>33</sup>

This leads directly to Putter's main argument: "that in chivalric romance and tournament knights show they are not women, by pretending to be women".<sup>34</sup> By playing up the differences between men and women, the social threat that is the crossdresser is effectively dismantled. This is something that is found in many medieval narratives, but the trend continues in several modern genres as well. S.M. Gilbert has written a discussion on the subject in the context of modernist literature, and argues that in texts that centre on male characters, the same tendency towards jest prevails.<sup>35</sup> Victoria Flanagan makes the same case for children's literature: "When boys put on female clothing in children's literature, they generally do so in a gesture of male rowdiness. The results are humorous".<sup>36</sup>

Tales of female crossdressers tend towards a far more serious tone. In these narratives, crossdressing is not a joke, but a tool of deconstruction, a challenge to unjust social norms, a path towards empowerment. Why, one cannot help but ask, has this division persisted for so long?

The answer that most scholars present is fairly simple, and rests on the rigid hierarchy that is traditional to our patriarchist past. The central principle behind all this, is the lingering idea that a movement from male to female is a downward shift, whereas moving from female to male is seen in a positive light. Bullough frames this principle as follows:

Female cross-dressers were tolerated and even encouraged, since they were striving to become more malelike and therefore better persons. Male transvestites, on the other hand, were discouragd<sup>[sic]</sup> not only because they lost status but also because during the formation of Western attitudes most writers could find only one possible explanation for a man's adopting woman's guise, namely, a desire to have easier access to women for sexual purpose.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Examples are *Meraugis de Portlesguez* (c. 1220), *The Book of Sir Tristram* by Malory (1485), and the *Fabliau Trubert* (c. 1270), already introduced in an earlier note. The Norse *Prymskviða* is another example, which will be discussed in detail later on.

<sup>33</sup> Putter, p. 280.

<sup>34</sup> ---, p. 284.

<sup>35</sup> Gilbert, p. 396.

<sup>36</sup> Flanagan, p. 78.

<sup>37</sup> Bullough, p. 1382.

There are several different formulations of this idea in the writings of Putter, and elsewhere in Bullough's article as well.<sup>38</sup> Women dressing as men were more likely to be condoned, if not accepted, because this type of behaviour was seen as an expression of a natural inclination towards elevating oneself. Men dressed as women, on the other hand, were considered to be shameful, as they were debasing themselves, dishonouring their masculine nature. This explains why male crossdressers could easily be laughed at, or seen as engaging in general silliness, whereas tales of female crossdressers take on a more serious tone and deal with loftier themes. The fact that even in modern literature this trend persists, it must be noted, betrays the unfortunate fact that some of this misogyny lingers still.

With the matter of the unbalance between male and female crossdressing narratives addressed, I will now return to the question of motive. How does academic literature explain why both history and literature know so many examples of crossdressers?

In the farcical, male-to-female crossdressing narratives, the motivation is often fairly straightforward: the hero of the tale disguises himself as an inconspicuous woman, in order to gain access to a lady he should not have access to. Putter calls this the "get-the-girl" motif.<sup>39</sup> This is further attested by both Bullough and Hess, the latter of whom argues that "[m]en usually cross-dress in order to have access to the woman they desire, whereas women do so in order to benefit from masculine privilege, such as inheritance, or to be able to travel alone".<sup>40</sup> Being able to inherit is central in the motivation of Silence's crossdressing. There are, however, many other reasons which may drive a female character to dress as a man. Safety, which Hess already cites as a potential drive in the citation above, is a common answer.<sup>41</sup> Related to this is the need to escape or to find greater freedom.<sup>42</sup> One last potential drive, related to what Hess calls "masculine privilege", is the desire to enjoy the higher social status that comes with being (considered) male.<sup>43</sup>

The differences are clear. One can safely agree with Flanagan when she states that there is "a sharp disjunction between representations of the male and female cross-dressing experience".<sup>44</sup> Male crossdressing is far less serious, and often far less convincing – the masculinity of the crossdressers almost always remains intact, either because their feminine performance is so clumsy that it becomes unbelievable, or through a dramatic revealing of their masculinity after they succeed at their trick.<sup>45</sup> For female characters, however, "the cross-dressing is liberatory. It exposes the artifice of gender constructions, permitting the

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<sup>38</sup> Resp. Putter, pp. 282-3; Bullough, pp. 1381-3.

<sup>39</sup> Putter, p. 292.

<sup>40</sup> Resp. Bullough, p. 1382; Hess, p. 50.

<sup>41</sup> Anson, p. 3; Odak, p. 37;

<sup>42</sup> Wheelwright, pp. 6, 13, and 51; Flanagan, p. 79.

<sup>43</sup> Wheelwright, p. 6; Flanagan, p. 79.

<sup>44</sup> Flanagan, p. 79.

<sup>45</sup> To use the same examples as earlier: often this reveal simply means that the crossdresser gets to spend the night with the lady he desires, such as is the case in Malory's *Tristram*. In the case of *Trubert*, we find a more literal example of "revealing one's masculinity".

female cross-dresser to construct herself a unique gendered niche which is not grounded within a single gender category, but incorporates elements of both”.<sup>46</sup>

Here a new element appears: the construction of a “unique gendered niche”, which is not necessarily a goal in itself (although of course it can be, in certain cases), but rather an effect that follows the act of crossdressing. This niche, both removed from and incorporating elements of masculinity and femininity, is generally referred to as the Third Space. It is a common topic in discussions on crossdressing, and equally relevant to my exploration of the notions of gender expressed in my sources.<sup>47</sup> This ideology is expressed most clearly in the types of crossdressing narratives I have previously described as those in which the focus lies not on hiding, but on finding the self. The construction of this Third Space requires first a deconstruction of traditional gender conventions, which the crossdresser is exceptionally well-equipped for. By breaking the ties between their natural sex and the gender they assume (or of course: perform), they “reveal the arbitrariness of the relation between our bodies, our dress, and our behavior”.<sup>48</sup> Through nonconformity, the crossdresser is freed to form themselves in new, unique ways.

It is tempting to look at medieval narratives like these and dub them “proto-feminist”, but here lurks the danger of anachronism. In many cases, there is little that a contemporary audience would have deemed subversive. Odak argues that “[o]n behalf of postmodern gender theories, cross-dressing has been used as a demonstration of a fluid nature of identity. On the other side, changing the clothes in Christian hagiography indicates something completely different — a strong religious affiliation [...] Recipients of that time did not read them as socially or religiously subversive texts”.<sup>49</sup> This hearkens back to the argument that these particular crossdressing adventurers were not trying to fight the social order, but rather to reach a better place for themselves – or to better express their religious fervour – *within* that social order. With that, the intentions of the characters are certainly not to be considered subversive or proto-feminist. However, intentions are not all. The mere fact that the crossdressing women in these narratives are able to infiltrate male spheres, be they religious orders or the fields of battle, and subsequently thrive in those surroundings, can most definitely be read as proto-feminist: they undermined not the social order, but the ideas upholding it, namely that women are by nature unfit for priest- or knighthood, or whatever else for that matter. Just because this undermining is not the focus of contemporary interpretation, as Odak stipulates, that does not mean that the ideas are not present in all these narratives.

When it comes to crossdressing narratives, favourite topics of discussion are motivation (what drives a character to crossdress?) and effect (what happens when the character crossdresses?). As such, I would be remiss not to cover those subjects in the analysis.

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<sup>46</sup> Flanagan, p. 79.

<sup>47</sup> See for example Flanagan, who argues that in crossdressing narratives, “gender is removed from the traditional and limiting categories of masculinity and femininity, divisions created out of artifice and unworkable expectations, and reconstructed into a notion that is unfettered and autonomous” (p. 94).

<sup>48</sup> Putter, p. 280.

<sup>49</sup> Odak, p. 34.

In addition to these observations, there are a few other aspects of the current academic debate that I would still like to mention, as they can be used to fashion certain tools that can be of use in the analysis.

The first of these is concerned with structure. Both John Anson and Victoria Flanagan have drawn up general frameworks of the archetypical female-to-male crossdressing narrative. Anson is brief, and describes the framework as existing of three parts: “(1) flight from the world, (2) disguise and seclusion, and (3) discovery and recognition [...] complicated by further motifs”.<sup>50</sup> The complications can of course occur at any and every part of the framework, and the element of seclusion is primarily relevant for hagiographical works, but at its core the structure appears very useful. I have condensed it to a tripartite structure of 1) flight, 2) disguise, and 3) discovery.

Flanagan offers a more extensive structure. Condensed it in a similar way as I have done with Anson’s framework, it can be represented as follows:

- 1) “the heroine [...] embarks”,
- 2) “preliminary stumbling”,
- 3) Acceptable performance,
- 4) Superior performance.<sup>51</sup>

The crossdressing adventurer begins their journey, and quite soon decides or is forced to engage in crossdressing. They struggle to construct a convincing masculine performance, but are either helped or learn to do so at a level that the outside world considers acceptable. In most tales, the adventurer goes beyond that, to become exceptional in whatever they do, surpassing the men they encounter. This last element is absent in Anson’s structure, but it occurs in so many of my sources that it makes sense to include it. Flanagan leaves out the eventual discovery/revelation element, even though it appears vital to most of the narratives I know of. Perhaps her focus on children’s literature can explain this, a genre with which, it must be said, I am less familiar. Despite this missing element, the structure is still thoroughly recognizable.

In order to better analyse the sources discussed in the introduction of this paper, I propose an outline that merges both frameworks presented above. Since I see no reason to leave out any of the elements, the resulting framework would consist of the following five steps, each in their own way essential.

- 1) The beginning of the journey,
- 2) The preliminary stumbling,
- 3) The acceptable performance,
- 4) The superior performance,
- 5) The denouement.

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<sup>50</sup> Anson, p. 13.

<sup>51</sup> Flanagan, pp. 82-3.



This outline may be reminiscent of Vladimir Propp's list of functions, his fairy tale building blocks, or the traditional "heroic biography" that is used in studies of Celtic heroic literature. I will briefly explain each phase, and why it makes sense to divide the narratives like this. The beginning of the story is important, in the context of my analysis, because it is the part of the tale in which the motivation of the character is presented, that which drives the character to crossdress. As has already been stated, this is an oft-discussed topic in academic discourse. Based on the previous pages, this focus on motivation should come as no surprise: analysing the things that make women want to be (seen as) men are a short and straight path to exploring gender relations in different contexts.

The preliminary stumbling, a phrase I chose to copy from Flanagan for aesthetic reasons, is of interest because it highlights the differences between the character's usual performance, and the performance they are now engaging in. Gender indicators, one of the themes of the analysis, are central here.

To some extent, this argument can be made for the third step, the acceptable performance, as well. The reason that this is given a separate category is that it represents a very different stage of the disguise. Gender indicators became less important, because the character internalises them and as such they appear in less explicit ways. Here, the theme of identity construction becomes more important.

In the fourth step, we can find the most powerful tools of deconstruction. The character has already demonstrated to be able to perform masculinity in a way that seems natural at this point, and now proves that, furthermore, they can excel at that masculine performance, in ways that other men cannot.

The denouement, finally, is an essential part to be examined, because here we can more thoroughly explore the effects of the crossdressing. The reaction of the world to the fact that a crossdressing adventurer has been amongst them all this time can say a lot about the ideas of gender that underlie the narrative.

This framework provides many different hooks to which my own analysis can be attached. Before I begin, one final obstacle remains to be discussed and disarmed. For the analysis, in which both medieval sources and modern fantasy novels will be discussed, to be worthwhile, it must first be demonstrated that those two categories of literature are not only similar, but indeed, related.

## The Deep Roots of Fantasy

Fantasy literature is rooted in the medieval tradition. This statement has, so far, been one of the premises of this thesis, but in order to give weight to my analysis and the conclusions drawn from it, it will need to be explored further.

To some, the ties between the fantastical and the medieval may be obvious. In their article “Out of Mind, out of Sight” Finke & Shichtman state that “[i]n the popular imagination, the Middle Ages has become virtually synonymous with fantasy”.<sup>52</sup> After all, do they not resemble each other, with their castles and their knights and their quests? The pair follow up with a significant list:

One can hardly call to mind a fantasy work in any genre or media without calling up the medieval (and usually the Arthurian). Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Yes, Buffy pulls a sword from a stone), Star Wars, Doctor Who, Highlander, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Shrek, Dungeons and Dragons, The Chronicles of Narnia [...] all mobilize fantasies about the medieval even when, as in Buffy or Star Wars, their settings are modern or futuristic.<sup>53</sup>

So far, these are all superficial similarities and resemblances. To prove that the two bodies of literature are related, a deeper connection needs to be found.

Fortunately, this connection is not hard to find. The similarities referred to earlier appear to be just the tip of a massive metaphorical iceberg, consisting of stylistic and structural elements, of copied conventions, and much more besides. In the introduction of *Medieval Afterlives in Popular Culture*, Gail Ashton writes that “[p]opular culture extends and appropriates plots and protagonists of earlier texts, as well as the structures and conventions of medieval genres such as romance with its prolific afterlives in sci-fi, fantasy, and Arthurian-style quest-oriented adventures, to rework, revise, and revitalize them along the way”.<sup>54</sup> In fantasy, one can find plots and characters one may recognize from medieval literature, but there are also more conceptual elements, such as structures and conventions. In *Literature of Hope*, Flo Keyes adds four other connections to Ashton’s list: the function of the work, the position of the protagonist, archetypes, and themes.<sup>55</sup>

The function of both modern fantasy and medieval (and especially Arthurian) romance is, according to Keyes, to provide hope. To show that life can improve, that people can change and, as an extension thereof, that societies can, too.<sup>56</sup> This is the key theme of her book, and, according to her, also the primary relation between the two types of literature. One could argue that all literature can do this, but Keyes states that fantasy (which also includes science fiction) and medieval romance do this far more consistently than mainstream literature does.

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<sup>52</sup> Finke & Shichtman, p. 104.

<sup>53</sup> Idem.

<sup>54</sup> Ashton, p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Keyes, p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> ---, p. 10.

The focus on change and transformation in both traditions makes the crossdressing adventurer a natural fit.

When it comes to characters, there are two main ways in which fantasy and the medieval tradition are linked. There are, of course, plenty of direct appropriations: characters from medieval literature who, in some form or another, appear in modern media. Examples include most of the characters in the BBC's *Merlin*, Cabot's *Avalon High*, and Hume's *King Arthur* trilogy. More interesting, perhaps, are character *concepts* that are revised, or in other words, characters that are reminiscent of their medieval counterpart because of their role in the story, the position they find themselves in, the type of problems they must overcome, and the ways in which they accomplish this. Characters like this are, if not in line with the literal word of medieval literature, perfectly aligned with its spirit. Heroes like these, Keyes argues, are one of the defining concepts of fantasy literature.<sup>57</sup> They connect the human world with the fantastical, and, as focalisers, guide the human reader through an unknown, fantastical world. They serve as bridges, which means that they need to be at least as much human as they themselves are fantastical. Consequently, these characters need flaws, as Keyes describes:

Gawain cannot be perfect, because we are not perfect. If he is to teach us that we can reach beyond ourselves and be more than we are, his successes must be obtainable ones, obtainable for us as well as himself. If he has no flaws, he becomes a god, not a man, and the story shifts from romance to myth. If Frodo Baggins walks straight through the three books of *The Lord of the Rings* to the pits of Mordor and blithely tossed the One Ring into Mount Doom, he is no one we can be; virtually none of us are so free of doubt, so able to resist the lure of power.<sup>58</sup>

Heroes like Gawain and Frodo only function if they allow room for improvement, for growth. As mentioned before, being able to overcome, to grow, to transform, is what makes the heroes of fantasy literature and medieval romance so effective as bringers of hope.

On the conceptual level, the archetype is perhaps the most easily recognisable narrative element that can be appropriated or reused. Archetypes deal not with specific characters, but rather with roles or moulds that characters (or entire stories) can fill. They function as a sort of artistic shorthand, a shared vocabulary that connects a narrative to others in its tradition or genre. As such, the fact that medieval literature and fantasy literature share many of these archetypes is of significance. It is a clear indicator of the relation between the two subsets of narratives. As Keyes puts it, this sharing of archetypes "suggests a bond between the ages".<sup>59</sup> Some examples of archetypes are the Young Hero, representing hope for the future (so long as they succeed), the Wise Old Man and the Great Mother, who can

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<sup>57</sup> Keyes, p. 12.

<sup>58</sup> ---, p. 52.

<sup>59</sup> ---, p. 84.

help the heroes on their path to glory (or hinder them), the Quest itself, and the Transformation that follows it.<sup>60</sup>

The archetype of the Young Hero seems especially relevant, as it applies to protagonists from both *Le Roman de Silence* (Silence), Robin Hobb's trilogy (Bee), and Pratchett's *Monstrous Regiment* (Polly). Each have their own Great Mother (Eufemie, Molly, and arguably Jackrum) and Wise Old Man (Merlin, who may well be seen as the pinnacle of this archetype; Fitz and Wolf-father for Bee, and for Polly, again, arguably Jackrum<sup>61</sup>). All of them go through transformations, some more drastically than others.

There is one final element that ties medieval literature to modern fantasy, and it is an obvious one: the Marvellous, the Wonderous, or indeed the Fantastical. Medieval literature and fantasy alike are rife with mythological creatures, sorcerers and wizards, enchanted objects and powerful divine entities. Not only do the two subsets share this element, Keyes argues that the way in which it is used is identical as well: "Each type of literature presents the marvellous in a different way, but the goal is always the same, to supply the psyche with the tools needed to cope with the present and help humankind achieve its future".<sup>62</sup> This is one of the strengths of fantasy. It allows us to take a step away from reality – not to escape it (or at least not exclusively), but to look at it from another angle. Much the same can be said about medieval romance, myth, and legend.

The previous pages have given an indication of just how deep the roots of fantasy go. The genre wears its relation to medieval literature like a badge of honour, clear for all to see. Themes, motifs, character types and indeed, characters themselves move from the medieval to the modern in a striking display of continuity. While it is clear that fantasy, in all its forms, is different from medieval literature, it is equally clear that behind those differences, a deep connection persists.

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<sup>60</sup> The Quest and Transformation could be seen more as motifs than archetypes, because archetypes tend to refer primarily to characters. I am using the term "archetype" here in the same way as Keyes does in her work, which means that it can also include motifs.

Jackrum is a fascinating character. As Polly's commanding officer, (s)he takes on the role of her mentor and teacher. However, (s)he has a very strong Motherly side as well, which is reinforced when (s)he is revealed to be a crossdresser himself.

<sup>62</sup> Keyes, p. 115.

### 3: Analysis – Introduction

This analysis is structured around three main themes, which are Gender Indicators, Dramatic Irony, and Identity Construction. Each will be explored in a separate chapter. The themes have been briefly introduced in the first few pages of this thesis, but here I will explain how I intend to use them in an attempt to answer my research question. After this, I will provide a general framework for my analysis, and reflect briefly on an unexpected but especially vexing obstacle: the question of which pronouns to use for crossdressing characters.

In chapter 4: Gender Indicators, I will primarily focus on performances and the elements of which these consist. What do the characters do in order to construct a convincing performance? Are specific clothes or a new hairstyle enough, or does behaviour feature here as well? How does this new performance interact with the character's old, native performance, if it does so at all? In this chapter, the crossdressing adventurer's outermost layer is peeled off, as the way they present themselves is explored in detail, granting access to that which lies beneath the performances.

Chapter 5: Dramatic Irony takes a more conceptual approach to the study of crossdressing adventurers. This chapter is all about shared secrets between reader and character(s), a doubly interesting narratological element when it comes to crossdressing narratives. I will explore the use of humour and the role and effect of playful language, and study the sources not from a frontal approach, but through the subtext of the narratives.

Chapter 6: Identity Construction is the final and most diverse chapter of the analysis, simply because it has so many facets. I will discuss names, both given and assumed, and delve into the motivations, the forces that drive the characters to crossdress. I will explore for which characters crossdressing becomes part of their identity, and for whom it is never more than a pragmatic solution to a problem. I will discuss the characters' sense of self, and, finally, based on a study by M.E. Ryder and L.M. Zaerr, I will also explore a stylistic element that can be said to be part of character identity, namely character agency.<sup>63</sup>

Each of the following three chapters will begin with a short introduction of the theme, in which their general function, use, and relevancy will be discussed. Once a clear foundation has been established, I will explore what role the theme plays in that chapter's key text, by using it as a guiding principle in a close reading of the narrative(s).<sup>64</sup> Next, the discussion can turn to the effects of the theme, in a brief reflection, before the other sources (first the medieval ones, then the modern tales) are included, and the true comparative analysis can begin. Each chapter will end with a short conclusion, in which I will reflect on my findings so far, and discuss how those findings guide the discussion towards an answer to the question with which it all began: how does fantasy literature relate to medieval narratives in their

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<sup>63</sup> "A Stylistic Analysis of *"Le Roman de Silence"*", published in 2008. This article will of course be discussed in greater detail in the chapter in question.

<sup>64</sup> The key texts and other primary sources have been introduced in the introduction of this thesis. A very short summary of each of them has been provided in appendix 2.

representation of crossdressing adventurers, and what does this say about the exploration of gender binarity?

## A Note on Pronouns

When discussing crossdressing narratives, determining which set of pronouns to use can be a complicated matter. The observant reader will have noticed that there is no consensus amongst the scholars I have quoted as to whether Silence should be described as a he/him, she/her, or some other variations thereof. I cannot fault these scholars, for even in the original text, Heldris de Cornouaille is inconsistent in his use of pronouns. In the introduction to her edition of the narrative, Sarah Roche-Mahdi calls this inconsistency “a linguistic counterpart to Silence’s transvestitism”.<sup>65</sup> Most scholars end up choosing one set of pronouns, and stick with that one, ignoring the gender Silence is constructing/performing in the scenes in question for the sake of readability. The problem with this approach is that it undermines the idea that Silence’s gender is fluid. It attributes a gender to Silence, locking the character in a static, binary world. To avoid this pitfall, some scholars opt for the slightly more neutral she/he form, but this solves only part of the problem: she/he simply means “she *or* he”, and cuts out everything between these two extremes. To paraphrase Flanagan’s comment cited earlier: the crossdresser constructs a gendered niche that is independent of both male and female, while using elements from both categories.<sup>66</sup> To use any of the sets mentioned here forces the crossdressing adventurers in a category that is either male, female, or both, but all of these options are inherently binary, ignoring the Third Space. To respect and highlight this aspect of crossdressing narratives, I will predominantly refer to the crossdressing adventurers by using the gender-neutral “(s)he” form, meaning not “she *or* he” but rather “everything from she to he”. In informal circles, the neutral form “they/their” is often used for this purpose, but using “they” as a stand in for a third-person singular pronoun made for some uncomfortable reading. Not using this form has a downside: whereas “they” comes with “their”, “(s)he” does not have an accompanying possessive pronoun. As a result of this, I occasionally have to resort to such unpleasant constructions as “(S)he goes about her way” or “(S)he does his best.” I cannot stress enough that I do this not out of carelessness, nor do I intend to attribute a binary gender to the characters in question. The terminology needed to express fluidity in this sense simply does not yet exist, or at the very least has not spread out far enough to become widely accepted. In circumstances like these, I will pick the gender that best matches the character at the moment I wish to refer to, and hope that the reader may keep this specification in mind.

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<sup>65</sup> Roche-Mahdi, p. xxi.

<sup>66</sup> Flanagan, p. 79.

## 4: Gender Indicators

“But you didn’t *act* like women!”

Lieutenant Blouse, in *Monstrous Regiment*<sup>67</sup>

In this first part of the analysis, I will examine “gender indicators”. By this I mean narrative elements that are part of the crossdressers’ gender performance. I use the term “performance” here as Judith Butler did in 1988, when she described her view on gender: “an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (original italics).<sup>68</sup> This “stylized repetition of acts”, or in other words, the performance, is the theme of this first chapter of the analysis. This is the outermost layer, the first one encountered when one approaches the crossdressing adventurers, because it deals with the ways in which they present themselves. As such, it seems fitting to begin the comparative analysis here.

I have categorised the indicators in three categories: appearance, behaviour, and, exclusively in Pratchett’s *Monstrous Regiment*, mentality.<sup>69</sup> The relation between appearance and behaviour forms a crucial part of the tension of the narrative. This is something all of the case studies share, as I will demonstrate later on. In order to explore other structural similarities between the sources, I will revisit the general outline I sketched in chapter 2.

In *Amazons and Military Maids*, Wheelwright indicates several typical moments of friction for female warriors, which also work for female-to-male crossdressers. She states that “[a] female warrior would most keenly feel the contradiction of a woman living as a man in undramatic moments”.<sup>70</sup> She also points out the complications that arise when romance comes into play.<sup>71</sup> As such, during the close-reading of the sources, I have paid close attention especially to scenarios of these kinds.

The relevance of gender indicators lies in the fact that it is the most visible aspect of the crossdressing adventurer. As stated before, it is the outmost layer of the character. Because the ways in which the adventurers perform their newly assumed gender must be made explicit to the reader, the underlying ideas about gender are also brought to the fore. In a narrative that revolves around a female character performing a masculine gender, the ways in which they do this must be both clear and explicit. As such, we inevitably end up with an understanding of what is considered masculine behaviour. This basic element will provide a foundation upon which the rest of this analysis can build, and from where more conceptual elements – like dramatic irony and identity construction – can be more easily approached.

When it comes to crossdressing adventurers, some of the oldest sources available are the legends of female saints disguised as men. It seems fitting, then, to use these legends as

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<sup>67</sup> Pratchett, p. 390.

<sup>68</sup> Butler, p. 519.

<sup>69</sup> Of all the sources studied for this thesis, Pratchett’s crossdressers are the only ones that make a conscious effort not merely to *look* and *act* male, but also to *think* male. I will return to this shortly.

<sup>70</sup> Wheelwright, p. 51.

<sup>71</sup> ---, pp. 53-4.

the key texts of this first chapter. But there is another, more significant reason why I have chosen to work with these texts: in almost all cases I have encountered, the legends are brief, and the act of crossdressing is solely discussed in terms of, indeed, gender indicators.

Examples of crossdressing saints are many, but two in particular will serve as primary case studies. Saint Thecla of Iconium (present-day Konya, Turkey), because she is “almost surely, the original instance of what subsequently became the dominant motif in the lives of a whole group of saints”,<sup>72</sup> and Saint Eugenia of Alexandria, because her story is a good example of a more developed, traditional legend in this vein. At times, reference will be made to other legends, if they can offer additional insights or examples that are useful and absent in the tales of Thecla and Eugenia.<sup>73</sup>

The amount of attestations of crossdressing saints is surprising. In the desert surrounding Alexandria alone, Anson has identified no less than ten different crossdressing saints.<sup>74</sup> I use the word “surprising”, because, as so many scholars have rightly pointed out, crossdressing is expressly forbidden in the Bible.<sup>75</sup> Luckily, the explanation for this oddity has already been discussed in chapter 2: in the medieval world, women aspiring to be more masculine were seen as attempting to improve themselves. Putter goes so far as to state that “a woman’s aspiration to pass for a man was readily comprehensible to medieval people in terms of a “natural” desire for social elevation and self-improvement”.<sup>76</sup> In chapter 2, I cited Bullough, who made much the same point. This clears up the confusion somewhat, but there is more. As Stipe Odak has pointed out, one must also keep in mind that these texts are legends, and one of the most basic elements of legends is their “inspirational character”.<sup>77</sup> Odak explains this as follows:

Legend is not merely a piece of narrative, but a specific piece of text written as a testimony of heroism and audacity. Female cross-dressing is a perfect example of that. These legends teach us to think “outside the box”, provoking us to find a solution even when all opportunities have been constrained with tradition, legislation and customs.<sup>78</sup>

Perhaps, then, it is not so strange to see so many examples of the crossdressing saint motif – the inspirational aspect is certainly still very relevant for the modern narratives, as has

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<sup>72</sup> Anson, p. 1.

<sup>73</sup> There are other Christian figures that many people think of in the context of crossdressing adventurers, like Joanne d’Arc. I have chosen not to use her tale as a case study in this thesis, because a vital element is missing. As Bullough put it: “Unlike the other women, however, she was always recognized as a woman and never made an effort to be other than a woman in male garb” (p. 1390). The crossdressing here exists only in the strictest sense of the word. Joanne’s draw to the fields of war necessitated a certain level of protection. This practicality goes beyond all other sources, and must therefore be considered as unfortunately irrelevant to the present discussion.

<sup>74</sup> Anson, p. 12.

<sup>75</sup> ---, p. 3. In Deuteronomy 22:5 (King James Version), it is written that “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God”.

<sup>76</sup> Putter, p. 283

<sup>77</sup> Odak, p. 42.

<sup>78</sup> ---, p. 42.



already been discussed. It makes sense for narratives like these to have played a similar role in the past.

At the start of this chapter, it was mentioned that the hagiographies present crossdressing primarily, if not exclusively, in terms of gender indicators. It does not, for example, affect the characters' sense of self. Crossdressing is an action, performed by the characters in a fairly straightforward manner. In the legend of Thecla, for example, crossdressing is mentioned twice. The first time is when Thecla wishes to travel with Paul in order to learn more about his religion. Here, (s)he suggests that (s)he could cut her hair, a very rudimentary form of crossdressing.<sup>79</sup> The implication is that this would be enough of a disguise. Paul, however, does not agree with Thecla's plan, arguing that (s)he is not ready, and still in danger of falling for temptation, as the only woman in a company of men. It seems unlikely that this comment is aimed solely at Thecla's suggestion of crossdressing, for what does temptation have to do with that? Rather, I would take this to mean that Paul believes Thecla is not ready to be admitted to his inner circles, to enter the realm of male spirituality, because (s)he has not yet proven her virtue. Only after being separated from Paul and overcoming several trials (such as the advances of a rich nobleman, and being sentenced to death by wild animals) does Thecla earn her place, and her baptism. Afterwards, (s)he sets out to seek Paul again, this time not with her hair cut short but actually clad in a man's cloak.<sup>80</sup> There is, then, a relation between a masculine appearance on the one hand, and a certain worthiness on the other.

Like Thecla, Eugenia hears someone preaching Christian teaching, and is moved to "follow [...] our Lord Jesu Christ".<sup>81</sup> To do this, Eugenia joins a monastery, in "the habit of a man".<sup>82</sup> The abbot, who "would in no wise suffer that any woman should come to him", is shown the truth about "Brother Eugene" (through divine intervention, no less) but because of his hard work and unquestionable virtue, the abbot says: "Thou sayest truly and well that thou art a man, for thou workest virtuously".<sup>83</sup> Eugene does so well that, when the head of the monastery passes away, (s)he is chosen to take up the mantle of provost.

An interesting parallel between the two key texts presents itself here. Masculine vestments appear to be tied to Christian virtue, which is given a more significant role in determining whether someone can claim to be a man than their biological sex. This was apparent, this to some extent, when Thecla was not permitted to so much as dress like a man before having demonstrated her virtue to Paul, but in Eugenia's tale it goes beyond that. The abbot, known for his aversion to women, welcomes Eugene. He knows about his subterfuge, but shows that, to him at least, his virtuous work carries greater weight in determining gender than biology. In chapter 2, it has been stated that from a medieval perspective, women might be expected or tolerated to crossdress in order to elevate themselves. Here, we see that the elevation functions rather as a prerequisite for the crossdressing, or, in the case of Eugene,

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<sup>79</sup> Schaff, p. 489.

<sup>80</sup> ---, p. 491.

<sup>81</sup> Ellis, par. 1.4.

<sup>82</sup> ---, par. 2.1.

<sup>83</sup> ---, par. 2.2.

for becoming a man. Only if the characters are virtuous, or elevated enough, are they allowed to dress like men.

Both Thecla and Eugenia engage, in their own ways, in heroics. As Odak puts it: "Those Saints did some amazing heroic deeds in order to preserve or achieve chastity and holiness. These deeds include ascetic life, long probation, acceptance of injustice etc".<sup>84</sup> Much of Thecla's heroics were, admittedly, dependant on divine intervention, but her bravery and virtue certainly count here. The same can be said about Eugenia. I would argue that being virtuous is a sub-type of a broader gender indicator, namely being heroic. Using this interpretation allows for better comparisons with secular narratives, which include countless feats of heroism of their own, even though not all of them are necessarily virtuous in the Christian sense of the word.

Wheelwright pointed out that one of the biggest challenges crossdressing adventurers face is romance (or in many cases: lust). In many of the hagiographies of this type, the love or lust of another woman is the final challenge the saint must overcome. Eugenia/Eugene's tale is a prime example of this. Important as "Brother Eugene's" virtue is, it also has a downside: it makes him an attractive prospect for romance. Like many crossdressing adventurers, Eugene inadvertently wins the admiration of a woman of questionable morals. The lady in question lures Brother Eugene to her abode by pretending to be ill and in need of aid. Then, "she told to her in what manner she was taken in his love, and how she burned in desiring him, and prayed her that she would lie by her and have to do carnally, and embraced her and kissed her and exhorted her to do sin".<sup>85</sup>

After Eugene refuses her, the lady resorts to a ploy that many ladies spurned by crossdressers come up with (as will be made apparent later on in this chapter): she accuses Eugene of having raped her.<sup>86</sup> When brought to trial, the only defence available to Eugene is to reveal the absurdity of the claim: she "took her coat and rent it unto her girdle above, and said that she was a woman, as it appeared".<sup>87</sup> She reveals the female body under the masculine coat.

There is another variation of this legend, as Bullough points out, in which the crossdresser does not reveal her secret. Saint Margarita, who fled to a priory to escape a bad marriage, and who likewise was accused of rape, chose not to defend herself, suffering rather exile and living out her life in pious prayer, as a hermit. Only after her death did her secret come out.<sup>88</sup>

So far, three gender indicators have been discussed: hairstyle and dress (appearance), and being virtuous or heroic (behaviour). Being attractive to women is not so much a gender indicator in itself, but rather proof of the effectiveness of the crossdressers' performance.

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<sup>84</sup> Odak, p. 35.

<sup>85</sup> Ellis, par. 3.1. It would be interesting to subject the original text to a close reading as well, and not just the translation. If the pronouns there are as inconsistent as in the translation, this would make for a nice argument for the fluidity of Eugenia/Eugene's gender.

<sup>86</sup> ---, par. 3.3.

<sup>87</sup> ---, par. 4.5.

<sup>88</sup> Bullough, pp. 1384-5.

Once the saints, like Eugenia/Eugene or Margarita, commit to a masculine performance, no female gender indicators remain, and the masculine indicators obfuscate the saints' sex completely. There are, of course, exceptions. Anson briefly discusses the legend of Matruna, about whom he writes that it was "suspected that she was a woman from her delicate footprints and her blushing".<sup>89</sup> This seems, however, to be an exception of the rule.

At this point, it is time to move this discussion away from the key texts of this chapter, and compare them with the two other medieval works, and the collection of modern fantasy. Are the gender indicators in these narratives as straight-forward and absolute, or do we find complications?

In many ways, the *Þrymskviða* can be seen as the polar opposite of the collected narratives of crossdressing saints. There are of course the obvious conceptual pairs of Christian versus Pagan, and Female-to-Male versus Male-to-Female, but the effectiveness of the respective protagonists' performance is also vastly different. Whereas Eugenia's performance of Eugene was absolute, when Thor literally takes on the guise of Freya, his masculinity constantly shines through.

All things considered, this is not very surprising. Of all the Norse Gods, Thor, in the role of strongest warrior (and most formidable drinker) can easily claim the position of "manliest" of the *Æsir*. This is evident in the poem as well: the very first words of the poem are "Thor was angry".<sup>90</sup> Almost immediately afterwards, there is mention of his beard.<sup>91</sup> The combination of this inner masculinity (in the form of aggression) and the outward signs of Thor's masculinity (his beard) ensures that the reader has this aspect of Thor firmly in their minds.<sup>92</sup> These initial gender indicators are so strong that, like the reader, Thrym is not easily convinced when Thor puts on a feminine performance later on in the narrative.

To reclaim his stolen hammer, Mjölner, Thor must engage in crossdressing. This motif is hinted at early on in the poem: when Loki is sent out to track down the hammer, he can only do so by borrowing the cloak of the goddess Freya.<sup>93</sup> The fact that the cloak allows its wearer to fly is more important than the fact that it belongs to a woman, but regardless of that, the scene can still be read as a foreshadowing of the crossdressing to come. Because indeed, as soon as Loki returns with the location of the hammer, and the terms on which it will be returned (namely: the ice giant Thrym has stolen it and will only give it back in exchange for the hand of Freya), both Thor and Loki must dress as women, in order to fool Thrym into thinking that he is getting what he demanded. Specifically, the plan that is suggested is the following:

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<sup>89</sup> Anson, p. 13. Matruna's legend can be found in *Patrologia orientalis*, Vol. 3.

<sup>90</sup> Dronke, verse 1, line 1.

<sup>91</sup> ---, verse 1, line 3.

<sup>92</sup> Inner masculinity in the form of aggression is also appears in *Monstrous Regiment*. I will return to this shortly.

<sup>93</sup> ---, verse 3, line 3.

Let's dress Thor in a bridal head-dress  
Let him wear the great necklace of the Brisings.

Let keys jingle about him  
And let women's clothing fall down to his knees,  
And on his breast let's display jewels,  
And we'll arrange a head-dress suitable on his head.<sup>94</sup>

As with the hagiographies, there is a strong emphasis on appearance. Thor is given feminine clothing to wear, as well as an assortment of jewellery, and that is supposed to mask the fact that this manliest of gods is, in fact, a man. Noteworthy is the fact that, unlike with the crossdressing saints, Thor's masculine gender indicators are not repressed in the slightest. For example, there is no mention of how Thor's beard, so prominently present in the opening lines of the poem, is hidden – if it is hidden at all! When Thor arrives at Thrym's hall, he eats and drinks with prodigious fervour, so much so that Thrym remarks that he has “never seen any woman with a bigger bite, nor any girl drink so much mead”.<sup>95</sup> Later, when the happy husband-to-be lifts his bride's veil for a quick kiss, he literally jumps back to the other side of the hall, remarking that Freya's eyes are terrifying, as if they were burning. Here again we see Thor's aggression, his inner masculinity, pouring out from beneath the bridal surface. Only through Loki's clever lies can the pretence continue, until Thor is given the chance to reclaim Mjöltnir.

Noteworthy is that Loki's own performance is far more effective. He becomes “the very shrewd maid”,<sup>96</sup> and is referred to by the narrator as “she”, whereas Thor is always referred to in the male form. His masculine gender indicators play too large a role for him to effectively crossdress. Equally interesting is the fact that, while the description of Thor being dressed is fairly lengthy, of Loki it is only said that he will “go with [Thor] to be [his] maid”, with no mention of a disguise.<sup>97</sup> If it is unsurprising, as I stated, that Thor's masculinity is hard to hide, it is conversely just as unsurprising that Loki managed to hide his male nature so well. He is a shape-changer, a trickster god. Because there is no mention of him crossdressing in the literal sense, we may as well assume that he has changed his shape, to truly become a “very shrewd maid”. This may explain the pronouns used. However, this is only speculation. It is time to move on to the third medieval case study: *Le Roman de Silence*.

In the case of Silence, the complications found are of a different nature. Her performance is far more convincing than Thor's, but Silence does not “become a man” in the sense that Eugenia did. Rather, I would posit Silence as a champion of the Third Space. Her performance incorporates elements of both the masculine and the feminine spheres. Furthermore, many of those masculine elements are not included because Silence seeks to disguise her feminine nature, but simply because they are part of who (s)he is. This is best

<sup>94</sup> Dronke, verse 15, line 3 to verse 16, line 4.

<sup>95</sup> ---, verse 25, lines 3 and 4.

<sup>96</sup> ---, verse 26, line 1. Verse 28, line 1.

<sup>97</sup> ---, verse 20, line 2.

discussed in the sixth chapter, on identity construction, and as such I will let this matter rest a little while longer, and turn instead to the types of gender indicators that are used in *Le Roman de Silence*.

From his earliest youth, Silence was raised, dressed, and treated as a boy.<sup>98</sup> Soon afterwards, (s)he begins to excel at activities that are traditionally seen as manly, such as wrestling, jousting, and skirmishing.<sup>99</sup> Earlier, I spoke of “native genders”, meaning the gender (and accompanying performance) a character is used to. In the case of Silence, that native gender is definitely more masculine than feminine. Throughout the narrative, Silence’s masculine gender indicators are continuously foregrounded. Occasionally, we encounter lists, such as when Silence thinks of the things (s)he would have to stop doing if (s)he were to forgo his masculine performance. These lists include both behavioural elements, such as going out hunting, and elements that deal with appearance, such as having short hair and wearing breeches.<sup>100</sup> At one point, Nature personified makes an appearance, commanding Silence to behave as she intended him to. Nature says:

“Ne dois pas en bos conserver,  
Lancier, ne traire, ne berser.  
Tol toi de chi!”cho dist Nature.  
“Va en la camber a la costure”

“You have no business going off into the  
forest,  
jousting, hunting, shooting off arrows.  
Desist from all this!” said Nature.  
“Go to a chamber and learn to sew!”<sup>101</sup>

Despite the momentary confusion Nature sows, Silence goes on to have a very successful career in the guise of a man. First as a minstrel, then a courtier, and later a knight.<sup>102</sup> In this last position, (s)he makes a name for himself in the courts, until (s)he develops into a leader in his own right, commanding a small warband.<sup>103</sup>

So far, Silence’s seems to exist mainly in the masculine sphere. Where are all the feminine elements that warrant a title like “Champion of the Third Space”? From a cursory reading, Silence may indeed appear too masculine for such a title. Deeper beneath the character’s surface, however, Silence’s feminine side very much exists.

In the *Þrymskviða*, it was clear that masculinity and aggression are closely linked. While it is true that, especially towards the climax of the *Roman*, Silence has shown himself more than capable of dealing damage, (s)he does not solve every problem with violence. The first time someone is set on killing Silence, for example, clever words are what defeats the conspirators, not a strong sword-arm.<sup>104</sup> In the context of the *Roman de Silence*, clever speech is a very feminine trait. Indeed, one of the principle female characters, Silence’s mother,

<sup>98</sup> Roche-Mahdi, v. 2359-62.

<sup>99</sup> ---, v. 2494-5.

<sup>100</sup> ---, v. 2559-62.

<sup>101</sup> ---, v. 2525-28.

<sup>102</sup> ---, v. 5115-44.

<sup>103</sup> ---Resp. v. 5191-4; v. 5375-85.

<sup>104</sup> ---, v. 3457-76.

Eufemie, is named after this trait, and shows her mastery of it several times.<sup>105</sup> To see Silence utilise this same skill can be seen as definitive proof that (s)he belongs in no single binary sphere exclusively. (S)he combines the gifts (and thereby also the behavioural gender indicators) of his parents: his mother, skilled with words, and his father, a veritable dragon slayer. This, I would argue, earns Silence the title “champion of the Third Space”.

Judging by the sources discussed, one’s appearance is often the primary indicator of one’s gender. Looking the part plays a significant role in the crossdresser’s performance. However, as has been demonstrated, behaviour appears to be almost equally important. If it matches the expectations conjured up by the crossdresser’s exterior, the performance is reinforced, and can sometimes transcend even biology, as was the case with saint Eugenia/Eugene. On the other hand, if the behaviour does not match the appearance, as was the case with Thor, the crossdresser is continuously at risk of being found out. All things considered, these sources reinforce the medieval view of the relation between man and woman, which has been described in the theoretical framework that preceded this analysis. Men do more and better things than women, these sources appear to tell us. They are better suited for both virtue and heroism. Yet it is not all one-sided. *Le Roman de Silence* carried within it an implication of feminine prowess, in the form of eloquence.

The question that in this present context must follow, is: how does this compare to the usage of gender indicators in fantasy literature? The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to answering this question. As a final note: with the exception of *Le Roman de Silence*, all medieval sources discussed are relatively short. This is not the case with the fantasy novels to be discussed. The greater quantity and variety of examples this brings along with it, means that our discussion can delve a little deeper still.

During my analysis of the fantasy novels chosen as case studies, it became clear to me that when it comes to gender indicators, the differences between the two traditions are but few. The general ways in which gender indicators are handled are very similar. Once again we encounter a strong focus on appearance, and once again success is determined in the relation between appearance and behaviour. Noteworthy is the additional field of mentality, which is used in Pratchett’s *Monstrous Regiment* to highlight an interesting, hidden layer of the crossdressing adventurer. Each of these three categories of gender indicators – appearance, behaviour, and mentality – will be discussed in the following pages, with close attention paid to both similarities and prominent difference between these sources and the ones discussed above.

Gender indicators dealing with appearance are often the first a reader encounters. In the medieval sources, there were two primary examples, namely clothing and hairstyle. As these are some of the most visible aspects of any character, it is not surprising to find that these two examples also play a large role in the modern sources. Indeed, the first five words

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<sup>105</sup> Roche-Mahdi translates the name to “use of good words” in her introduction to the *Roman*, on p. xx. Character names will be discussed more in-depth in chapter 6.

of *Monstrous Regiment* are "Polly cut off her hair".<sup>106</sup> Éowyn merely hides her golden hair underneath a helmet, but the effect is similar.<sup>107</sup> Long hair is a symbol of femininity, in many settings, both modern and medieval. Hobb's primary crossdresser (for there are quite a few of them – but more on that later), Bee, serves as an interesting example of a variation of the rule. Early in her life, she loses her mother, which results in a distinct lack of feminine touches in her upbringing. (S)he is not necessarily raised as a boy, as Silence was, but rather in a free, almost gender-neutral way. The way (s)he wears her hair is described as a "warrior's tail", which is a type of braid that begins almost at the top of the head.<sup>108</sup> To most western readers – raised in a culture where, as has been discussed, the military is the crucible of ultimate masculinity – this has definite male connotations, even though there are numerous female warriors on the battlefields Hobb presents to her readers.

This free-spirited neutrality is even more visible when it comes to the way Bee dresses. With a clear preference for functionality over fashion, others often mistake Bee for a boy.<sup>109</sup> When a visiting lady of nobility outright asks Bee about this, (s)he expresses this preference clearly:

"Why are you dressed like a boy?"

I looked down at my tunic and leggings. I had a few spiderwebs on my ankle. I picked them free. "I'm dressed comfortably. Do you like wearing all those layers of skirts?"<sup>110</sup>

At another point, Bee remarks that (s)he "looked more like a serving boy than our serving boys did".<sup>111</sup> This may be interpreted as an example of the female crossdresser outperforming men at masculinity, but it is more likely that it is simply a way of expressing Bee's worn-out looks after an afternoon of exploring secret corridors hidden in the walls of her home.

Bee clearly enjoys the freedom of "slit garments and breeches", just like Silence.<sup>112</sup> But there is more to it than that, as the following citation shows:

I did not feel like a lace-and-earring sort of person, I discovered. My mother had enjoyed such finery and I had loved how it looked on her. Yet I felt more drawn to emulate my father's plain clothing and simple ways.<sup>113</sup>

Bee does not simply state that (s)he enjoys wearing plain clothing, but that (s)he enjoys wearing plain clothing *like her father*. The aspect of emulation clearly plays a role here. The comfort of simplicity is directly associated with the most important masculine figure in Bee's life, and, as (s)he herself states, (s)he is drawn to it. The performance (s)he constructs is based,

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<sup>106</sup> Pratchett, p. 9.

<sup>107</sup> Tolkien, p. 823.

<sup>108</sup> Hobb, *Fool's Assassin*, p. 223.

<sup>109</sup> ---, ---, p. 363.

<sup>110</sup> ---, ---, p. 395

<sup>111</sup> ---, ---, p. 445.

<sup>112</sup> Roche-Mahdi, v. 2559-62.

<sup>113</sup> Hobb, *Fool's Assassin*, pp. 549-50.

in part, on her father's. The gender indicators Bee uses for that construction, then, are masculine as often as they are feminine - if not more often indeed.

Bee is not the only of Hobb's characters with a complicated or mixed set of gender indicators. There are at least three others with a habit of crossdressing, for varying purposes. The spymaster Chade has various personae, some of whom female. Most of those feature in books outside the trilogy explored for this thesis, and are only mentioned from time to time in the books at hand. The Fool/Lady Amber and Spark/Ash do not merely crossdress, but assume a completely distinct identity as they switch back and forth between male and female. Spark/Ash is especially intriguing, since (s)he bears a lot of similarities with Silence. (S)he will be discussed further in chapter 6.

In *Monstrous Regiment*, dress also serves to indicate gender, but in a different way: as soldiers, the characters all wear uniforms. Now, because only men are allowed to join the military in this setting, wearing the uniform clearly implies "male" to any who see it. Uniforms convey a certain expectation of masculinity.

Expectations are an important theme in any crossdressing narrative. Like the adventurers in Pratchett's regiment, Éowyn's masculine performance also relies heavily on expectations summoned by uniforms and uniformity. The first time the reader encounters Dernhelm, the male persona Éowyn constructs, is exemplary: (s)he is standing in line with other soldiers, armed, armoured, and most significantly in this case, helmed like the rest is. Yet (s)he stands out, being smaller than the other soldiers (or in Tolkien's poetry: "less in height and girth"<sup>114</sup>). This is an inversion of an earlier appearance of Éowyn. When (s)he is first described in the third book, it is as "a woman with long braided hair gleaming in the twilight, yet she wore a helm and was clad to the waist like a warrior and gilded with a sword".<sup>115</sup> Here, Éowyn is first and foremost a woman, dressed (surprisingly, the "yet" implies) like a soldier. It must also be noted that in this scene, Éowyn rides out to meet the king and as such, (s)he is isolated. The differences are subtle: as Dernhelm, Éowyn hides her hair under her helmet, which is enough, when surrounded by other soldiers, to be accepted as just another warrior of the Rohirrim. For that is what people expect to see.

I would briefly like to discuss voice as an indicator of gender. It is not often mentioned, but the way a character sounds can be just as important as how they look. As such, it might not be much of a surprise to read that Dernhelm keeps to himself and avoids talking, perhaps in order to hide the voice that might be recognised as Éowyn's.<sup>116</sup> Spark/Ash, who has had more time to work on keeping her male and female side distinct, has a separate voice for either persona, and as such does not need to isolate herself, like Dernhelm.<sup>117</sup>

There is one final sort of appearance-related gender indicator that has not yet been mentioned: anatomy. The simple fact that the male and female bodies are distinct is not often mentioned in crossdressing narratives. Once again, Pratchett has provided the exception: his

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<sup>114</sup> Tolkien, p. 785.

<sup>115</sup> ---, p. 778.

<sup>116</sup> ---, p. 812.

<sup>117</sup> Hobb, *Fool's Quest*, p. 366-71; *Assassin's Fate*, p. 251.



regiment of crossdressers use socks to “bulge where [they] should bulge”.<sup>118</sup> Polly’s socks become a stand-in for male genitalia, and evolve into a personal symbol of masculinity, as potent as the real deal. When a corporal mocks a batch of new recruits by saying that he dreads to think what it will take to turn them into real men, Polly thinks to herself: “about ten seconds and a pair of socks”.<sup>119</sup>

But looks are not all, as we have already seen: if the behaviour does not match the expectations conjured by the appearance, problems arise. This was the case for Thor, but similar scenario’s riddle the modern sources. To stay with my previous example, the following excerpt of *Monstrous Regiment* gives a clear example of this:

Thalacephalos [a horse] wasn’t the sort to buck and kick. She was the sneaky kind, Polly could see, the sort that stepped on your foot –

She moved her foot just as the hoof came down. But Thalacephalos, angry at being thwarted, turned, twisted, lowered her head, and bit Polly sharply on the rolled-up socks.

‘Bad horse!’ said Blouse severely. ‘Sorry about that, Perks. I think he’s anxious to get to the fray! Oh, my word!’ he added, looking down. ‘Are you all right, Perks?’

‘Well, he’s pulling a bit, sir–’ said Polly, being dragged sideways. Blouse had gone white again.

‘But he’s bitten... he’s caught you by the... right on the...’

The penny dropped. Polly looked down, and hastily remembered what she’d heard during numerous rule-free bar fights.

‘Oh... ooo... argh... blimey! Right inna fruit! Aargh!’ she lamented, and then, since it seemed a good idea at the time, brought both fists down heavily on the mare’s nose. The lieutenant fainted.<sup>120</sup>

There are plenty more examples of masculine behaviour that the crossdressing adventurers of modern fantasy emulate. Relieving oneself features frequently.<sup>121</sup> Picking one’s nose, apparently, also belongs in the male sphere: both Polly and Bee use it as a powerful masculine display.<sup>122</sup> Shaving comes up several times in *Monstrous Regiment*.<sup>123</sup> The Fool, one of Hobb’s male-to-female crossdressers, surpassed even Polly in his crossdressing performance.<sup>124</sup> He has, for example, mastered a reflexive, very lady-like gasp, which is described as a “completely feminine gesture of surprise and relief”.<sup>125</sup>

Alternatively, there are also gender indicators of an opposing sort, namely those that go with the crossdresser’s native performance. Thor’s appetite is one such example, shining through his assumed feminine performance, but Pratchett shows us many more: a quick

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<sup>118</sup> Pratchett, p. 51.

<sup>119</sup> ---, pp. 88-9.

<sup>120</sup> ---, pp. 183-4.

<sup>121</sup> Pratchett, p. 50; Hobb, *Fool’s Quest*, p. 226.

<sup>122</sup> Pratchett, p. 306; Hobb, *Fool’s Quest*, p. 307.

<sup>123</sup> Pratchett, pp. 53-4; p. 160.

<sup>124</sup> Technically, the Fool’s gender is uncertain, as is evinced in Hobb, *Fool’s Assassin*, pp. 410-11. The character is generally assumed to be male, however.

<sup>125</sup> Hobb, *Fool’s Quest*, p. 712.

curtsy instead of a bow, or a particularly weak swearword – many things can give the unthinking crossdresser away.<sup>126</sup>

In the legend of Eugenia/Eugene, the motif of the spurned lover who turns to accusations of rape to get their revenge has already been introduced. It is interesting to note that this same motif appears in the *Roman de Silence*, where a lustful queen desires Silence.<sup>127</sup> While there are no direct parallels of this in the fantasy novels, the broader theme of dealing with love and lust does play a small role in *Monstrous Regiment*, when Polly has to avoid the advances of a very determined kitchen maid.<sup>128</sup>

Heroics, a key example of masculine behaviour in medieval literature, also plays a role in the modern sources under discussion. The focus has fully shifted away from Christian virtue of the crossdressing saints to Silence's martial heroism. Éowyn, "maiden of the Rohirrim, child of kings, slender but as a steel-blade, fair yet terrible" is the brightest beacon in this regard. Her heroism in the battle against the Witch-king of Angmar and his fell steed is unquestionable. First (s)he slays the drake-like beast upon which the Witch-king flies with "[a] swift stroke [...], skilled and deadly."<sup>129</sup> Lesser creatures than this have been called dragons, and as such I think it fair to say that Éowyn reaches a height that even Silence could not, joining Silence's father in the ranks of the dragon slayers. Note also that the stroke was "skilled", no mere lucky blow. Seconds later, the Witch-king himself, who according to a thousand-year-old prophecy could be slain by no living man, falls to Éowyn sword. Eugenia/Eugene's heroism (taking the form of his virtuous work) led people to dismiss his feminine side, but that is not the case for Éowyn. In some ways, it may even be said that her power comes from her femininity – though it must also be remembered that without Dernhelm's masculinity, Éowyn would never have had the chance to face her foe. This is a complex issue, to which I will return in the chapter on identity construction.

Polly and her regiment are not so lucky as Éowyn: their femininity leads to significant complications: "No one wants to know that a bunch of girls dressed up as soldiers and broke into a big fort and let out half the army [which was held captive there]. Everyone knows females can't do that. Neither side wants us here".<sup>130</sup> Where Éowyn was heroic *because* she was a woman, as just stated, Polly and her fellow soldiers were seen as having done something heroic *despite* being women, and that, many feel, is impossible. Where do these sources stand in comparison to their medieval counterparts?

In the hagiographies, Eugenia became a man in all but form through her virtue. Silence is heroic and masculine, but the moment (s)he becomes feminine again, all signs of that heroism fade, and, for the first time, Silence truly becomes silent.<sup>131</sup> Thor is heroic and mighty,

<sup>126</sup> Resp. Pratchett, pp 116-7 and p. 110. "Sugar!"

<sup>127</sup> Roche-Mahdi, v. 3711-4095.

<sup>128</sup> Pratchett, pp. 107-8.

<sup>129</sup> Tolkien, p. 823

<sup>130</sup> Pratchett, p. 412.

<sup>131</sup> Roche-Mahdi, v. 6669-76. Nature spends three days to wash away everything the hardships of an adventurer's life had caused to Silence's body at the end of the roman.

but only once the feminine façade is dropped. There exists, then, a clear ideology beneath the surface of these narratives, which holds that heroism belongs to the male sphere.

While it is true that the *world* in which *Monstrous Regiment* takes place holds to that same idea, the way in which the narrative unfolds – and, unlike *Le Roman de Silence*, also the way in which it ends – clearly shows that anyone can be heroic. The same goes for Bee, who survives extreme hardship after being kidnapped, only to become known as “the Destroyer” to her captors, near the end of the trilogy. Éowyn demonstrates that women can be heroic, even in situations where men cannot: while (s)he is locked in combat with the Witch-king, the other soldiers flee. If the medieval narratives are seen as empowering for women, then the modern novels are far more so.

In all the tales that have been discussed so far, there has been at least one example of either of the two main groups of gender indicators: appearance and behaviour. Only in *Monstrous Regiment* have I found a character who goes beyond appearance and behaviour, to a third and final category of gender indicators: mentality.

As Pratchett’s heroine, Polly Perks, sets out on her quest, (s)he thinks to herself: “Forget you were ever Polly. *Think* young male, that was the thing”.<sup>132</sup> The fact that this statement is found so early in the narrative signifies that we are dealing with a different approach to crossdressing than we see in the other sources, from either category. The focus on mentality makes gender a way of thinking, as much as a way of behaving or a way of presenting oneself. And if gender is a mode of thought, then fixed, binary genders become highly artificial. As Polly demonstrates, changing the way one thinks can effectively change whether one “is” a boy or a girl. With no little concern, Polly reflects that this switching “had been so... easy”.<sup>133</sup>

There are other scenes in the book where mentality plays a role in characters’ performances. When Polly is mustering courage, (s)he thinks, “I’ve got to be a man about this”.<sup>134</sup> (S)he is channelling a positive, masculine force (namely courage) and does that by mentally sliding her gender towards the masculine side of the scale. Similarly, in the heat of an argument, when (s)he feels like her aggression might sweep her away and deeper into trouble, Polly thinks: “it doesn’t have to go this way. You don’t have to let a pair of socks do the talking”.<sup>135</sup> At this point, Polly’s socks have (literally) filled the absence of male genitalia, and have become a symbol for her masculinity. Polly takes a step back from that masculinity, back towards her femininity, in an effort to repress a negative male force, namely bull-headed aggression. Again, Polly moves her gender around to achieve the best possible result for the situation, merely by taking a different mental stance. Ways of thinking become gender indicators of their own, just as clearly as wearing trousers or being virtuous are in other sources.

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<sup>132</sup> Pratchett, p. 12.

<sup>133</sup> ---, p. 136.

<sup>134</sup> ---, p. 162.

<sup>135</sup> ---, p. 385.

As an aside, I would like to briefly comment on the structure of the narratives I have chosen as my primary sources. In chapter 2, I posited an outline of the basic crossdressing narrative, by merging two existing outlines. In appendix 1, I have made a rough table to demonstrate how each of my source narratives adhere to this outline. The only exceptions I found were in the hagiographies and in Éowyn's tale: Eugenia/Eugene and Éowyn skip the preliminary stumbling, and Thecla's performance goes from stumbling to superior. All other narratives fitted the outline, though in the case of the *Þrymskviða* it takes two characters to check off all five steps. While I was not able to develop this table further, it does reinforce the argument of the close connection between the medieval tales on the one hand, and the modern fantasy literature on the other. The narratives use the same building blocks to construct their tale.

Three categories of gender indicators have been discussed: appearance, behaviour, and mentality. The first two are present in all of my sources, and the balance between them is often the most prominent point of friction in a crossdressing narrative, whether there is agreement between the two as was the case for Eugenia, whether they clash as with Thor, or whether a more dynamic back-and-forth relation develops, as was the case in *Monstrous Regiment*. In their own way, each of the narratives has carried at the very least an undertone of empowerment, of hope and inspiration.<sup>136</sup> How that is achieved differs greatly between the medieval and modern sources. The legends about crossdressing saints, and to some extent also the tale of Silence, show that women can temporarily assume the guise of men in order to do great things – but never for an indefinite amount of time. There is always a denouement, where the crossdressing adventurer leaves society or resumes a traditionally feminine role. The empowerment is to be found in the moment, or in the subtext: whatever happens at the end of the *Roman de Silence*, Silence shows many moments of heroism, and has wrought lasting change during his career as knight. Eugenia and Thecla are inspirations in their virtue, and whatever they or anyone else might say, they begin their journeys as women, creating precedent for female heroism. At the core of these narratives lies the idea that extreme virtue or heroism is the purview of men, but that sometimes, women can be men, too.

The modern narratives disconnect heroism and success from gender. Éowyn, Bee, and Polly all bring lasting change, but they do not need to become men to do so. Oftentimes, they construct a masculine performance only to get to where they need to be. Éowyn achieved her greatest triumph *after* (s)he had discarded the disguise of Dernhelm, for one, and Polly's gender becomes so fluid, as (s)he moves back and forth across the scale, that the distinction between male and female is reduced to a choice, to be made in the moment and which can be altered at will. The empowerment here is not that women can be like men, but rather that it does not matter as much as society would have us believe whether you were born male or female. The more one is aware of this, the better one can tap into the strengths attributed to not just one of these spheres, but both.

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<sup>136</sup> The *Þrymskviða* may appear to be an exception to this rule, but because of Loki's highly successful feminine performance, I would argue that even this tale shows that change is possible.

## 5: Dramatic Irony

“If you need a woman, I’m your man!”

Lieutenant Blouse, in *Monstrous Regiment*<sup>137</sup>

An essential part of the crossdressing narrative is the shared secret between the crossdresser and the audience, concerning the identity of the crossdresser themselves. Without that secret, the act of crossdressing would lose its potency, and all its effect.

Dramatic irony is, in essence, also concerned with shared secrets. I use the term to refer to the phenomenon where both the reader and either the narrator or a character know about a relevant narrative element, while another character in the scene does not. I use the phrase “relevant narrative element” because if the “shared secret” concerns something trivial, such as what the protagonist had for lunch in the previous chapter, it does not carry the same weight as when the shared secret is that, say, the protagonist is in some way different from how they present themselves. In general, dramatic irony can be used for two ends: either to create humour, in which case the shared secret becomes something like an in-joke between the reader and the character; or to create suspense, such as when the reader can see a threat approaching a character who believes themselves to be safe.

The relevancy of dramatic irony in this particular context springs from the fact that it creates an intimacy between the reader and the character. In this intimacy, the reader is presented with an opening to another layer of the character in question. Assumptions, beliefs, and fragments of the character’s worldview become visible, and invite the reader to explore further. In the previous chapter, the focus was on actions and immediately apparent aspects of the crossdressing adventurers. In this chapter, the focus will shift, and I will explore the spaces between the lines, beyond and beneath the text, to take a more conceptual approach to answering the question how medieval narratives and modern fantasy novels explore gender fluidity.

The key text for this chapter is the *Lay of Thrym*, or the *Þrymskviða*. Like the hagiographies, this mythological poem is fairly short. Still, in the last half, where Thor and Loki crossdress in order to fool the lord of the frost giants, dramatic irony abounds. It plays a crucial role in the build-up to the climax of the poem. In addition to this, the effect to which dramatic irony is used in this text stands out when compared to the other sources. It is much more in line with what Putter wrote about the “joke” of knights in drag, and the conservatism inherent therein, as was cited in the theoretical framework.<sup>138</sup> As the odd one out, it makes sense to begin the exploration of dramatic irony in crossdressing narratives in the *Þrymskviða*. Afterwards, a comparative analysis will highlight how exactly this Nordic lay differs from the other sources.

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<sup>137</sup> Pratchett, p. 308.

<sup>138</sup> Putter, p. 280.

Thor's rather poorly constructed performance gives rise to plenty of opportunities for dramatic irony. The reader, of course, knows that Thor is only pretending to be a woman. Because of how transparent the performance is, the fact that Thrym continues to believe in the façade becomes all the more humorous. In a sequence of scenes that may remind the modern reader of Little Red Riding Hood questioning the wolf in disguise, Thrym continuously questions the weak points in Thor's performance, only to be tricked by Loki and his clever explanations.<sup>139</sup> The shared secret of Thor's identity teeters on the brink of being discovered, and the repetition of that balancing act results in humorous suspense, which culminates in a violent release when Thor reveals himself at the end of the poem. Because Thrym repeatedly comes close to learning the shared secret, but it always subverted by Loki, the dramatic irony in the scene remains active and intense. Furthermore, it highlights Thor's masculine gender indicators, such as his appetite and aggressive gaze, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Also mentioned in the previous chapter was the fact that while Thor might make a mess of his feminine performance, Loki is so successful that he becomes "the very shrewd maid" in this part of the poem (perhaps even literally).<sup>140</sup> This is another type of dramatic irony, well-represented in the fantasy novels. In the context of this thesis, this manner of dramatic irony often takes the form of one character addressing the crossdressing adventurer as something they wrongly believe to be fitting. While it is not a character who uses the phrase "the very shrewd maid" but the narrator, the narrator is clearly showing us Loki through the eyes of Thrym and his fellows, albeit with a wink to the reader. This form of dramatic irony highlights the shared secret between the crossdresser and the reader, because it continuously reminds us that the crossdressing adventurer is hiding something.

On several occasions, I have mentioned the empowering nature of the other crossdressing narratives that have been discussed. In this regard, the *Þrymskviða* holds an exceptional position, and here it becomes clear why. The usage of dramatic irony in the poem reinforces Thor's masculinity, by showing that it is not easily hidden (like Eugenia's felinity was easy to hide). The borders between masculine and feminine are not blurred, as was the case in most of the other sources, but strengthened. Crossing from one side of the scale to the other is shown to be impossible, the very notion of it is something to laugh at – or at least, in the case of Thor. Loki, as a less masculine god, is more successful, but his role as trickster and border-crosser in general puts him in a special position, making his convincing performance perhaps not quite as surprising.<sup>141</sup> The fact that Thrym might fall for Loki's tricks is excusable – everyone does. It is the continued belief in Thor's defective performance that marks Thrym as the butt of the crossdresser's joke, the fool who, unlike the reader, does not recognise Thor's otherwise unmistakable masculinity. As was the case with *Le Roman de Silence*, perhaps it can be said that this poem, too, does not provide a straightforward answer, but rather a

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<sup>139</sup> Dronke, v. 24; v. 27.

<sup>140</sup> ---, v. 26.1; v. 28.1.

<sup>141</sup> In other mythological poems, such as the *Völuspá hin skamma*, Loki gives birth to several monsters, highlighting his feminine side.

tension, or two options: Thor's forceful conservatism, and Loki's more subtle success at crossing borders generally held to be impenetrable. There is room here for further study.

What of the other two medieval sources? The hagiographies might not contain much dramatic irony, but the *Roman de Silence* certainly has a few examples. In the old-French romance, dramatic irony serves a different purpose than it did the *Þrymskviða*. Here, it is used to create subtext. The overt humour is less present, but the playful aspect is very much there, and warns the observant reader not to believe everything they read.

The roman contains two parts. The first is centred on Cador and Eufemie, Silence's parents. This section serves as a primer for Silence's own tale, in more ways than one. Motifs are introduced, the inciting incident is explained, and the values and viewpoints (regarding gender or otherwise) are established. Furthermore, the way dramatic irony functions in the narrative is already made apparent, albeit subtly.

One of the key figures in this part of the *Roman* is king Evan, who is praised throughout the section. His generosity and wisdom in particular are lauded by both the narrator and the characters.<sup>142</sup> However, the more one reads about the king, the more one starts to doubt the sincerity of his almost Arthurian attributes. When king Evan punishes all women of his realm in response to a tragedy caused by the greed of *one* man, the reader may rightly start to wonder if this king is as wise and generous as he is supposed to be.<sup>143</sup> Indeed, if the reader assumes this line of thinking about the king, certain verses that appear to praise him suddenly reveal a different message. For example, when the narrator proclaims the following:

A lui se doit on bien froter, Car chi puet on grant bien noter.	One should really pay careful attention to him, for one can learn an important lesson from him. <sup>144</sup>
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In light of the earlier doubts about king Evan, these lines can be read as dramatic irony: the narrator and the audience know something about the subject of this apparent high praise, king Evan, which he himself does not. The insincerity of the praise becomes the shared secret, and the "important lesson" the narrator speaks of becomes one that has nothing to do with wisdom or generosity. Rather, the lesson is that not everything is what it seems or is said to be. An apt lesson, for a romance concerned with crossdressing.

Much later in the narrative, when Silence is rising in the regard of the courtly world, a similar example of dramatic irony occurs. Here, the narrator does not make fun of a character (like Thrym was ridiculed), but rather of the established way of thinking about gender and gender relations. Without being primed by the earlier examples of dramatic irony, the section in question can become confusing and contradictory, but interpreted with the narrator's earlier sly mockery in mind, a more empowering message follows.

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<sup>142</sup> Roche-Mahdi, v. 107-38; v. 1301-8.

<sup>143</sup> ---, v. 309-18.

<sup>144</sup> ---, v.1307-8.

Kil veïst joster sans mantel	Whoever saw him jousting, stripped of his mantle
Et l'escu porter en cantiel	Carrying his shield on his left arm,
Et faire donques l'ademise,	Charging in the tournament
La lance sor le faltre mise,	With well-positioned lance,
Dire peüst que Noretüre	Might well say that Nurture
Peut moult overer contre	Can do a great deal to overcome Nature,
Nature,	
Quant ele aprent si et escole	If she can teach such behavior
A tel us feme et tendre et mole.	To a soft and tender woman. <sup>145</sup>

Silence performs incredibly well at the tournament, unhorsing knights left and right. Yet then (s)he is described as a “soft and tender woman”, which clashes with what was just demonstrated. Likewise, when (s)he is described as a “tender, soft, faint-hearted woman” (“*feme tendre, faite et malle*”) a few lines later, the reader is told one thing, while being shown quite something else.<sup>146</sup> Silence is anything but “soft” or “faint-hearted”, as the reader clearly just read. My conclusion is that dramatic irony is once again employed here. The narrator describes, perhaps a little mockingly, the way people in the setting of the *Roman* think about women, while the audience has clear proof that that belief is false. Once again, the insincerity becomes a shared secret between narrator and audience, and we are reminded that many things are not what they are said to be – neither king Evan, nor women in general.

On the surface, the *Roman de Silence* may express some very conservative ideas regarding gender relations. The sincerity of those statements, however, is in doubt, and in many cases the subtext behind those statements tells us a far more empowering message. Kings need not be wise just because they are kings, and neither do women have to be tender and soft, just because they were born women.

In the previous chapter, it was demonstrated that the modern sources use gender indicators in a way that blurs the lines between masculine and feminine, more so than the medieval tales do. What about the use of dramatic irony? Does it serve a similar purpose, or do modern authors employ it for other ends?

In my analysis of the novels, I was able to identify two different uses of dramatic irony, mainly in the works of Pratchett and Hobb. Hobb’s trilogy has many examples of dramatic irony that build suspense, often because the reader knows of trouble before the characters do. Because every book in the *Fitz and the Fool* trilogy tells its story through multiple characters, who are not always in the same place, the reader has a good vantage point to watch the events of the books unfold – a better one than the characters, at the very least, limited as they are to their own perspective. One of the clearest examples of this is found in the second book. Fitz has been forced to leave his home to rescue a friend, leaving his

<sup>145</sup> Roche-Mahdi, v. 5149-56.

<sup>146</sup> ---, v. 5161.



daughter, Bee, behind. He meets with his son in law, Riddle. Riddle and his wife Nettle, Fitz' daughter, have been critical of the way in which Fitz is raising his daughter. Talking about Bee's life, and about how Fitz has been unable to improve on the shortcomings Riddle pointed out during an earlier meeting, Riddle states that "The situation hasn't changed".<sup>147</sup> Meanwhile, the reader knows that the house where Fitz has left his daughter has been attacked, looted, and burned, and that Bee has been kidnapped by a foreign cult. In other words, the situation has *very much* changed. The reader shares a secret with the invisible narrator, and because Riddle and Fitz continue to make statements like the above, the tension continues to build, until they find out the truth at last.<sup>148</sup> The reader constantly knows that things are much, much worse than the characters are aware of.

The second type of dramatic irony, used to create humour in a way akin to how this was done in the *Prymskviða*, is well-represented in *Monstrous Regiment*. Earlier, I described this type of dramatic irony as one character addressing the crossdressing adventurer as something they wrongly believe to be fitting. *Monstrous Regiment* teems with moments like these. Early on, an officer is informing the new recruits, including Polly Perks, about what they'll be doing the following day: "And tomorrow it's a nice long march to Crotz, where you will arrive as boys and leave as men did I just say something funny, Perks?"<sup>149</sup> Later, when the officer is asked if they have perchance seen a certain gentleman about, he responds with "Not many gentlemen around here at the moment, sir." One of the recruits, in on the shared secret, nudges Polly, and whispers, "Damn right".<sup>150</sup> When the regiment is preparing to infiltrate an enemy keep, the reader has learned that the lieutenant, going by the name of Blouse, is the only soldier of the group who is actually a man. Additionally, Blouse is the only character in the regiment not in on the shared secret, wrongly believing everyone else (including his horse) to be male. When Blouse suggests that they might be able to get inside if they disguise themselves as washerwomen, and furthermore that *he* should be the one in disguise because he is "the only one who has any practise" at putting on a feminine performance – he went to an all-male school and was a member of the theatre club, where he occasionally played female roles – this motif reaches new and absurd heights.<sup>151</sup>

Hobb's trilogy has some of this, too. For example, prophecies foretell of an "Unexpected Son", and for various reasons, people believe that those prophecies refer to Bee. When these people seek Bee out, they come looking for a boy, and, expecting Bee to be one, treat her as such. This leads to many pieces of dialogue where Bee is depicted as male.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Hobb, *Fool's Quest*, p. 117.

<sup>148</sup> There are many other examples of this type of dramatic irony (such as on pages 7, 11, and 110, but also in the third book, *Assassin's Fate*, p. 592, where certain prophecies that befuddle one character make perfect sense to the reader, as they refer to events taking place in another character's storyline). Because they have little to do with the topic at hand, I cannot discuss these examples at length, intriguing as they may be.

<sup>149</sup> Pratchett, p. 89.

<sup>150</sup> ---, p. 131.

<sup>151</sup> ---, p. 307.

<sup>152</sup> Hobb, *Fool's Quest*, p. 23, for example.

What is interesting about this particular motif is that, while it is outwardly exactly the same as what occurred in the *Þrymskviða*, the effect is precisely the opposite. Rather than reinforcing the borders between male and female, *Monstrous Regiment* uses dramatic irony to blur those lines. Male and female become indistinct, easily confused. In the *Þrymskviða*, Thrym's failing to recognise Thor was absurd, and therefore worthy of mockery. The regiment is full of crossdressers, most of whom are effective in their performance. It is therefore not strange that people are fooled. What is funny is how easy it is to move along the gender scale, as Polly has remarked in a previous citation – while almost everyone around them believes that male and female are two very different things. Because there are so many of these examples, because the reader keeps being reminded how easy it is to alter one's gender, *Monstrous Regiment* achieves the opposite of what the *Þrymskviða* did: it makes a strong case for the silliness of clinging to the idea of rigid, easily defined, binary genders.

This is more in line with *Le Roman de Silence*, although it must be said that in Silence's tale, the blurring is *implicit*, whereas in the modern sources, and in *Monstrous Regiment* especially, it becomes very much *explicit*. The exploration of gender fluidity *is* present in the corpus of medieval sources, as has been demonstrated, but it exists most prominently in the subtext. One possible explanation of this is that we now live in a society more open to alternative ways of thinking, but this thesis is not the place to prove or disprove that. Suffice to say that it is fascinating that, as early as the thirteenth century, alternatives to the binary gender model are already being put forward – carefully and cleverly. This suggests that my hypothesis, that it is natural to question the unnatural, to challenge social constructs such as the idea of binary genders, might have some merit to it. We will see if the final chapter of this analysis, on identity construction, supports or subverts this.

## 6: Identity Construction

“There is no shame in being who and what you are. In partaking of two worlds instead of one.”  
The Fool/Amber, in *Assassin’s Fate*<sup>153</sup>

In this final chapter of the analysis, I will venture beyond the disguise of the crossdressing adventurer, to examine the identity of the paper person (or persons) that lies behind it. Identity is a complicated and multifaceted subject, and as such there are many questions to explore in this chapter. How are identities constructed? Which of the adventurers use crossdressing to hide, and which of them find themselves through it? Related to this is the question of motivation, which appeared so prominently in the overview of other scholarly work on crossdressing narratives: *why* do the adventurers crossdress? How do the characters see themselves, and how does this relate to how they are seen by their environment? I will also discuss two adjacent subjects, which I would argue are a part of identity construction. Character names, given or assumed, can be as much part of an identity as appearance, behaviour, and mentality. Secondly, based on a very interesting study by Mary Ellen Ryder and Linda Marie Zaerr, I will explore character agency.<sup>154</sup> How much agency a character has can be seen as part of their identity. Beyond that, it can also serve as a tool for the author, allowing them to influence how the character is perceived, and to manage to reader’s expectations. I will expand on this momentarily. Perception and appearance, it should be evident by now, are significant factors in any discussion on crossdressing adventurers.

Character identity and their sense of self is one of the most direct ways in which literature can explore gender fluidity. By demonstrating how characters see themselves, and contrasting that with how others see them, ideas about the fluidity of gender can be experimented with, explored, and exposed. All of the questions above contribute to this vital piece of the puzzle. Therein lies the relevance of this last set of questions.

As key text for this chapter, I have chosen the text which set me on the track that eventually led to the present thesis: *Le Roman de Silence*. Much like this chapter, the *Roman* is a text filled with questions, explicit or implicit. It is a tale that explores options, rather than pointing to one single truth. In 1986, R. Howard Bloch called it a “systematic refusal of univocal meaning”.<sup>155</sup> In a more recent publication, K.H. Terrell writes about “the destabilising nature of gender throughout the poem.” She argues that “the text endorses two competing ideologies of gender that are never reconciled” and that “this questioning is more consequential and revealing than the poem’s potential to endorse either an exclusively feminist or an exclusively misogynist ideology”.<sup>156</sup> Statements like these are omnipresent in the literature available on the *Roman*. The constructed nature of identity is highlighted in the

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<sup>153</sup> Hobb, *Assassin’s Fate*, p. 330.

<sup>154</sup> “A Stylistic Analysis of “Le Roman de Silence””, published in *Arthuriana*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2008), pp. 22-40.

<sup>155</sup> Bloch, p. 88.

<sup>156</sup> Terrell, p. 46.

poem, which makes it an interesting and fitting key text for this final chapter. And so we dive in. How is identity constructed in this thirteenth-century narrative?

Earlier in this thesis, I made the distinction between characters who use crossdressing to hide themselves, and characters who find themselves through the act of crossdressing. Motivation is closely related to this division: characters belonging in the former category often have pragmatic drives, such as a need to escape something or someone. This was the case with some of the saints that have been discussed. Characters of the second category are often driven by more complicated motivations. I would argue that Silence belongs in this second, more complicated category.

When Nature creates Silence, at the beginning of the narrative, the narrator tells us that never before was anyone given so much beauty. Outwardly, it is made clear that Silence was “meant” to be feminine. In order to safeguard Silence’s right to inherit, however, (s)he is raised as a boy. Nature takes offense at this, but very soon, the child proves to be much more at home in the masculine world than (s)he would be in the feminine. I have discussed how quickly Silence picks up traditionally masculine skills, such as hunting and jousting. On top of that, (s)he also expresses how much more comfortable (s)he feels as a man than (s)he would as a woman, after a long debate between Nature, Nurture, and Reason.<sup>157</sup> This is the conclusion Silence draws:

“Voire,” fait il, “a la male eure  
Irai desos, quant sui deseure.  
Deseure sui, s'irai desos?  
Or sui jo moult vallans et pros.  
Nel sui, par foi, ains sui honis  
Quant as femes voel estre onis.  
Gel pensai por moi aäsier  
Trop dure boche ai por baisier,  
Et trop rois bras por acoler.  
On me poroit tost afoier  
Al giu c'on fait desos gordine,  
**Car vallés sui et nient mescine.**  
Ne voel perdre ma grant honor,  
Ne la voel cangier a menor.  
Ne voel mon pere desmentir,  
Ainz me doinst Dex la mort sentir.  
Por quanque puet faire Nature  
Ja n'en ferai descoverture.”

"Indeed," he said, "it would be too bad  
to step down when I'm on top  
If I'm on top, why should I step down?  
Now I am honored and valiant  
No I'm not, upon my word-I'm a disgrace  
if I want to be one of the women.  
I was trying to make life easy for myself,  
but I have a mouth too hard for kisses,  
and arms too rough for embraces.  
One could easily make a fool of me  
in any game played under the covers,  
**for I'm a young man, not a girl.**  
I don't want to lose my high position;  
I don't want to exchange it for a lesser  
and I don't want to prove my father a liar  
I would rather have God strike me dead!  
Whatever Nature may do,  
I will never betray the secret!"<sup>158</sup>

<sup>157</sup> The nature-nurture debate is another example of how *Le Roman de Silence* incorporates elements that are still relevant to the general discussions of today. For a more detailed discussion of the topic, see Roche-Mahdi, p. xix.

<sup>158</sup> Roche-Mahdi, v. 2639-56.

Silence is aware of “the secret” concerning how (s)he was born, and of the need to lie about it. Despite initial confusion and doubt, his conclusion is clear: Silence is “a young man, not a girl.” Initially, Silence’s parents, Cador and Eufemie, are the ones who make the decision for their child to crossdress. It starts out as an effort to hide Silence’s femininity, but grows into something more than that. When Silence is confronted with all the details about Cador and Eufemie’s secret, a period of doubt follows. It is only in the verses cited above, I would argue, that Silence consciously decides (or perhaps finds out) that this is who (s)he is. The hiding is only the first step on a path that leads Silence to this moment of discovery. If it weren’t for that first step, Silence would never have achieved all that the *Roman* related. In other words, without the crossdressing, Silence would never have found out who (s)he is – it is an essential aspect of Silence’s identity.

The citation above presents the reader with a comprehensive overview of Silence’s motivation to (continue to) crossdress. The issue of social status and honour is raised first, followed by a statement about being unfit for femininity, and in particular for activities revolving around lovemaking. Next, Silence repeats the argument about honour and status, before adding a final reason, namely the preservation of the honour of Cador, who first claimed Silence was a boy, and who would be disgraced if it were to be discovered that he had lied. Silence’s motivation, then, is multifaceted and complex. This is in line with expectations expressed in the introduction of this chapter.

I wish to linger on Silence’s sense of self for a little while longer. It is clear that Silence identifies as male, but in chapter 4, in a discussion about Silence’s behaviour, I explained that Silence mixes masculine might with feminine eloquence and desire for peaceful resolution. I would argue, then, that there is more to Silence than either category, male or female, can cover. A similar conclusion arose from Terrell’s research, mentioned above, but there is also evidence for this in the poem itself. To some extent, Silence can be argued to embody several different personalities, as shines through in the following citation:

Ne li vallés ki est mescine  
Ne violt pas dire son covine,  
de sa nature verité,  
Qu’il perdriot donques s’ireté

Nor did the youth who was a girl  
wish to reveal **her** secret,  
the truth about **her** nature,  
because **he** would lose **his** inheritance<sup>159</sup>

In this section, Silence has an outer persona, who is male and eligible to inherit, but who also is at risk if the secret that belongs to the inner, feminine persona is revealed. Note, however, that because of the nature of Old-French grammar, this comment is based more on the translation than on the source. As such, this says more about Roche-Mahdi than it does about Heldris de Cornouaille. Still, is any one of these personas more real than the other? This question, I feel, is more significant than any answer – certainly more so than any I could provide. Perhaps it would be useful to take a more inclusive view, and accept both selves as being part of the crossdressing adventurer called Silence.

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<sup>159</sup> Roche-Mahdi, v. 3871-4.

In the introduction to her edition of the *Roman*, Sarah Roche-Mahdi takes a moment to discuss the role of names. In *Le Roman de Silence*, as in many other crossdressing narratives, names are an important theme. The name “Silence” itself is a prime example of this. Not only is it a speaking name, hinting at the secret Silence does to wish to share, but the way it is discussed by Cador and Eufemie when Silence is born is very interesting as well. “Silence” is the (neutral) Old-French form of the name, but in Latin it is either “Silentia” or “Silentius”, according to which gender one wishes to attribute to Silence. Roche-Mahdi’s observation about this set of names is worth repeating:

The play with Silentius/Silentia demonstrates that woman cannot be seen as a minus of man: the root is the same, the endings are grammatically (if not socially) equivalent. This indicates an unsettling proximity [...]. When male and female are reduced to an arbitrary gender distinction marked by minute grammatical suffixes, what does a minute difference in the genitalia signify?<sup>160</sup>

This comment about the relation between male and female is telling, as it foreshadows an underlying message that has been discussed in the previous chapter: the two are not so different after all. One is not better than the other, and any real differences are found only in the smallest details. With the proper training, and a healthy dose of aptitude, a girl could unhorse as many male knights as the more traditional boy-heroes of Arthurian romances.<sup>161</sup>

So far, Silence has proven to be a fruitful vessel for the exploration of gender binarity. *Le Roman de Silence* asks questions and poses options, but never gives a clear, consistent answer. Silence is heroic, that much is evident. (S)he uses feminine and masculine powers with equal success, and as such seems a worthy champion of the Third Space, as (s)he has been styled earlier in this thesis.

A stylistic analysis of the *Roman*, however, indicates that perhaps Silence’s position is not as strong as it seems. In their 2008 article, Ryder and Zaerr argue that while Silence is an active, supposedly heroic agent, “a systematic stylistic analysis reveals that the language of the text relentlessly diminishes his perceived power”.<sup>162</sup> Effectively, through various linguistic and stylistic means, the reader’s perception of Silence is undermined. As has been stated, perception and expectation are key in crossdressing narratives, and as such this issue certainly merits closer study.

There are several methods that, supposedly, are used to destabilise Silence’s image as a knight. Ryder and Zaerr discuss the ability of characters to change the world around them, stylistic tools such as deceleration and acceleration, intentionality, and speech figures. I will briefly discuss each of these aspects, so that I may apply some parts of it to my other sources. The audience’s perception of a character, I would argue, is an aspect, or at the very least a

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<sup>160</sup> Roche-Mahdi, p. xxi.

<sup>161</sup> There are other interesting names that could be discussed at this point, such as “Eufeme” and “Eufemie”. This discussion would move the focus away from crossdressing towards gender roles in general, and as such I will only refer the interested reader to Roche-Mahdi’s discussion of the matter, on pp. xx-xxii of her edition of the *Roman*.

<sup>162</sup> Ryder & Zaerr, p. 22.

reflection of Silence's identity construction. As such, this particular line of reasoning forms a fitting ending to the discussion of identity construction in *Le Roman de Silence*.

The first method of destabilisation relates to Silence's ability to affect the world at large. It may seem odd to state that a protagonist is unable to change their world in a significant way, but according to Ryder and Zaerr it is a matter of statistics. "The most powerful agents," they argue, "are those who create a serious or permanent change in an equal or superior. There are 462 references to Silence as an actor or agent in the text, but in only fifteen percent of these (seventy) does Silence effect a serious change on an equal or more powerful entity".<sup>163</sup> Far more often than not, Silence's actions do not have considerable effect, and this might make the character appear weak in the eyes of the reader. While this does not match my personal experience of reading the text, it is impossible to make any concrete statements about this without further research.

Selective usage of deceleration and acceleration achieves a similar effect. The scenes in which Silence performs his most heroic actions, like the jousting scene already mentioned, move at such a rapid pace that the reader only gets to experience Silence's heroism for short spans of time. Conversely, whenever Silence is victimised, the narrator decelerates. As a result, the reader lingers on the image of Silence in the position of subject. By foregrounding particularly weak or passive aspects or actions of Silence, his heroism becomes less convincing. "The audience [...] spends more time experiencing a Silence who is acted upon by others than a silence <sup>[sic]</sup> who initiates action himself".<sup>164</sup> Furthermore, whenever Silence does get a moment in the spotlight, and uses skills the character becomes famous for (fighting or playing music, for example) are highlighted, the narrator is not only brief, but also very general. Details are lacking, and the images, Ryder and Zaerr argue, are not framed to stand out.<sup>165</sup>

Silence rarely takes the initiative. An especially poignant example of this principle in action is Silence's final quest: capturing Merlin. Rather than showing how Silence comes up with a clever way to seize the famed sorcerer, Heldris gives us the following: Silence encounters an old man (who, Ryder and Zaerr rightfully point out, "may in fact be the victim"<sup>166</sup>) who provides a step-by-step guide to capturing Merlin. Silence, ever dutiful, follows the man's advice, and takes Merlin back to court. All things considered, it is not how one would typically envision an Arthurian knight to complete a final quest.

The last point Ryder and Zaerr raise concerns figures of speech. While Silence does not suffer any serious injuries throughout the *Roman*, references to trauma and painful deaths are plentiful. Many characters wish Silence to come to harm, and in describing this, they conjure up an image of Silence's death in the minds of the audience. The summary provided in Ryder and Zaerr's article reveals how prominent this method is:

To be precise, Silence 'dies' ninety-four times in the text. [...] In the hopes, fears, and plans of other characters, and in his own fears and dreams, Silence is hanged nine

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<sup>163</sup> Ryder & Zaerr, p. 24.

<sup>164</sup> ---, pp. 25-6.

<sup>165</sup> ---, p. 29

<sup>166</sup> ---, p. 32.

times, beheaded seven times, burned to death four times, drowned four times, has his neck broken twice, and is torn apart twice by wild animals.<sup>167</sup>

This last point, while evocative, I find less convincing. Sure enough, there are plenty of scenes in which someone hopes for or otherwise describes Silence's demise, but equally important is the fact that Silence overcomes every single one of the ninety-four "deaths". Does this weaken the character, or is it a testament to Silence's skill and endurance? To cheat death is the business of heroes, in both medieval and modern stories. Silence, it would seem, is especially skilled in this regard.

Once again, the *Roman* does not present a straightforward answer. The poem contains elements that speak of the power and skill of its hero, but also of Silence's weaknesses. The *Roman* does not expressly state that male and female are completely irrelevant categories, but it does question the rigid divide between the two, and carefully, cleverly proposes that maybe the two are more alike than they are generally perceived to be. The discussion of names is a clear example of this, as is the fact that Silence, despite being born female, performs incredibly well as a man. Silence's motivation tells us more about the status-quo, whereas the character's sense of self informs the reader of Silence's struggle to fit her fluid identity into that rigid mould. The discussion on agency shows that that does not go without trouble, which is exemplified, for example, by the hero's passivity, which is represented as a flaw more fit for women than for men. Still, even that part of the discussion was not one-sided: Silence's continued perseverance in the face of a cornucopia of potential deaths is, without a doubt from me, heroic. It shows that the undermining of Silence, as discussed by Ryder and Zaerr, is not quite as absolute as it is made out to be – that our Champion of the Third Space is still standing.

In the cases of the other medieval sources, little can be said about identity construction, and as such I will be brief. Thecla, Eugenia, and Thor all have fairly pragmatic reasons to crossdress (respectively: to travel in safety, to gain access to religious learning, and to fool someone into lowering their guard<sup>168</sup>). Thecla and Thor crossdress exclusively to hide, but with Eugenia the matter is a little more complicated. (S)he becomes a man in all but biology, but that is a means to an end. In the case of Silence, crossdressing was far more entrenched as part of the character's identity.

The (re)naming conventions in Eugenia's legend are very similar to how names are treated in the *Roman*. The relation between "Silentia" and "Silentius" is certainly not very different from that between "Eugenia" and "Eugene". Once again, the difference between masculinity and femininity lies only in the details.

Aside from these short comments on names and motivations, little of what was discussed regarding *Le Roman de Silence* can be found in either the saints' lives or the

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<sup>167</sup> Ryder & Zaerr, p. 33.

<sup>168</sup> Thor's crossdressing seems related to the "get-the-girl" motif discussed earlier. Instead of winning access to a woman, Thor and Loki trick Thrym in order to steal back a weapon.



*Þrymskviða*. The characters do not reflect on how they see themselves, for example.<sup>169</sup> Agency plays only a minor role in the stories. In the case of the *Þrymskviða*, agency is linked to masculinity. While Thor is struggling to present himself as feminine, he does very little of note. It is only when he is reunited with his hammer, the token of his masculinity, that he can be his true, violent, agentive self again.

Little more can be said about identity and the construction thereof in regards to the medieval sources. Fortunately, this theme plays a far more significant role in the fantasy novels. As such, I will turn to Tolkien, Pratchett, and Hobb for a third time, to explore how their characters' identities are built up, and in which ways this is used to explore gender fluidity.

It has already been stated that the motivation of the crossdressing adventurer is a favourite topic amongst scholars. As such, this is where I would begin the discussion on the modern sources. Why do these characters choose to present themselves as something they are, biologically speaking, not? Several typical answers have already been discussed: safety is a common reason for women to dress as men, for example. A longing for more freedom, or for a higher social status, were also mentioned in the pages above. Where do the crossdressing adventurers from modern fantasy stand?

Éowyn/Dernhelm is perhaps the character with the most straightforward drive to crossdress. Much like her medieval counterparts, Éowyn's reasoning is fairly pragmatic: (s)he feels a desperate need to fight for her people, against the wishes of her king. The only way (s)he would be allowed to go where (s)he needs to be, would be to fool the other soldiers into thinking her a man.

For Hobb's Bee, crossdressing is a form of protection. In a monologue, we read that it "was safer to present myself as a boy".<sup>170</sup> *Monstrous Regiment*, with its many crossdressers, shows a multitude of different types of motivation, ranging from following or finding loved ones lost to the war, to divine inspiration.<sup>171</sup> Most prominent – if not as a reason to start crossdressing, then at least as one to keep doing so – is the elevation in social standing the adventurers in *Monstrous Regiment* enjoy. The setting of the novel is very polarised. There are clear ideas about what is men's work (most importantly: soldiering<sup>172</sup>) and what is the work of women (housekeeping<sup>173</sup>). Time and time again, Polly's regiment of crossdressers notice how much better they are treated now, just because they wear breeches instead of skirts. The following passage is a fine illustration of this:

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<sup>169</sup> Although Thor does worry about how others see him: when the crossdressing is first suggested, he expresses concern, stating that he fears the others will call him a "pervert" if they see him in a dress (Dronke, v. 17.2). This only reinforces the conservatism of the poem: clearly it is not seen as natural for men to dress as women.

<sup>170</sup> Hobb, *Assassin's Fate*, p. 141. Note the phrase "present myself", which hints at a possible understanding of performance theory, or at the very least a lucky choice that fits perfectly within the Discourse this thesis engages in.

<sup>171</sup> Resp. Pratchett, pp. 119-20 and 200.

<sup>172</sup> ---, p. 60.

<sup>173</sup> ---, p. 364 and p. 369.

‘Have you noticed men talk to you differently?’ said Lofty shyly.  
 ‘Talk?’ said Polly. ‘They *listen* to you differently, too.’  
 ‘They don’t keep looking at you all the time,’ said Shufti. ‘You know what I mean. You’re just a... another person.’<sup>174</sup>

Surprisingly, the characters talk not about being treated in any special, exceedingly respectful way, but rather about being treated as equals, in a way that can only be called “normal”. Naturally, this is a strong reason for the characters to persist in their crossdressing. When the regiment encounters a group of girls who actually dress feminine, Polly thinks, “Idiots! Get yourselves some trousers!”<sup>175</sup>

The (perceived) differences between masculine and feminine are firmly embedded in Pratchett’s world. In fact, one passage even reflects on the differences between female-to-male and male-to-female crossdressing. As just discussed, Polly and the rest of the regiment feel empowered, when they transition from performing as feminine to performing as masculine. However, at a certain point, Polly is surprised, alone, by enemy forces. To escape, (s)he picks up a petticoat, hides the uniform (s)he was wearing, and “pretends” to be a woman. As (s)he does so, “inside there was a certain... sock-ness that felt ashamed”.<sup>176</sup> The socks in Polly’s breeches, stand-in symbols of masculinity, give her a sense of shame when (s)he “crossdresses” as a woman, mirroring the tradition of male-to-female crossdressers of which Thor is a representative – doubly so, indeed, because Polly uses the feminine performance to lull the enemy troops into complacency, before ambushing them!<sup>177</sup> This illustration of the differences between male-to-female and female-to-male crossdressing, paradoxically within a single character, highlights once again the central point *Monstrous Regiment* seems to make: masculinity and femininity are states of mind, between which one can very easily switch.

Names in crossdressing narratives have a tendency to speak, as *Le Roman de Silence* already demonstrated. In the modern sources, there are several examples of this phenomenon as well. Most often, the names have a similar function as “Silence” does: it serves to hide. The name “Dernhelm” (Old-English for “Hidden Protector”) is an obvious example of this.<sup>178</sup> Éowyn is already dressed in armour and equipped with a sword when the reader first encounters the character, as has been mentioned before, but (s)he has one strong feminine indicator: her long, golden hair.<sup>179</sup> When (s)he becomes Dernhelm, that hair is hidden away beneath a helm, just like the assumed name covers the given name. Conversely, when the time comes to reveal who (s)he is, Éowyn sheds the linguistic and the physical helm at the same time, revealing the golden hair beneath it once more, and announcing her true

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<sup>174</sup> Pratchett, p. 174.

<sup>175</sup> ---, p. 342.

<sup>176</sup> ---, pp. 123-4.

<sup>177</sup> ---, pp. 126-7.

<sup>178</sup> Allen, J. *An Introduction to Elvish*. Web.

<sup>179</sup> Tolkien, p. 778.

name.<sup>180</sup> Like with Silence, the name of the masculine persona is not random, but effectively becomes part of the disguise.

Another fine example of this is the character Spark/Ash, a supporting character in Hobb's trilogy. Like Silence, Spark/Ash was born female but raised as a boy, for safety. "My true name," the character tells the others at one point, "is Spark. Ash is what covers a coal and hides its light".<sup>181</sup> The names "Spark" and "Ash" follow almost exactly the same formula as the pair "Éowyn" and "Dernhelm". The first, true name is hidden by the second. Like a helm can cover hair, ash covers the light and sparks of coals.

The names discussed highlight the constructed nature of the identities used by the crossdressing adventurers in question. In the case of Éowyn, the name is just another layer of the disguise, to be discarded when the time is right. Spark/Ash has a more complicated story. In this case, Ash is not simply a way to hide Spark. It does start out that way, but well before the reader is introduced to the character, the disguise develops a life of its own, and Ash becomes a fully formed facet of Spark/Ash' identity, as real and as complex as the feminine side represented by Spark.

This brings me to the next topic: the sense of self. I will begin by further exploring the relation between Ash and Spark. Taken out of context, the previous sentence may well be interpreted as dealing with two distinct characters, and, to some extent, it might as well. Spark and Ash might share a body, but are otherwise very distinct from one another. Fitz, familiar with Ash, reacts with great surprise when he first meets Spark: "I marvelled at what I saw. It was not merely a change of clothing and a frilled cap with buttons. She was an entirely different creature".<sup>182</sup> Fitz is not the only character who sees Ash and Spark as distinct entities, even when he is let in on the shared secret. Spark/Ash also keeps the two separated: at one point, while (s)he is Spark, (s)he says that "sometimes I am Ash".<sup>183</sup> Identity, for Spark/Ash, is not permanent, or fixed, but something that can be changed. Spark does not say "sometimes I play Ash" or "sometimes I pretend to be Ash", or even "sometimes I dress like a boy". The word "am" clearly implies that Spark/Ash genuinely changes identity when (s)he goes from Spark to Ash. When Fitz addresses Spark/Ash as "Spark" while (s)he is Ash, he gets "an odd look".<sup>184</sup> Later in the trilogy, Fitz tries to explain this to Perseverance, his stable-boy-turned-squire, who considered Ash his friend, but struggles with the idea of a fluid identity. When Perseverance asks, "So that's who she really is? A girl named Spark?" Fitz replies: "Spark is whoever she is. Sometimes that's Ash. It's like being a father and a son and perhaps a husband. All different facets of the same person".<sup>185</sup> Fitz sketches an overarching identity, to which I have been referring as "Spark/Ash", of which both Spark and Ash are aspects. The analogy is not perfect, because it ignores the element of choice and the freedom to switch. Ash can become Spark whenever (s)he wants, but we cannot be someone's son one day, and their

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<sup>180</sup> Tolkien, p. 823.

<sup>181</sup> Hobb, *Fool's Quest*, p. 368.

<sup>182</sup> ---, ---, p. 393.

<sup>183</sup> ---, ---, p. 678.

<sup>184</sup> ---, *Assassin's Fate*, p. 251.

<sup>185</sup> ---, ---, p. 84.

father the next. The idea of facets, however, does hold, and the concept of Fitz' comparison rings true. He simply does not have the precise terminology to express the idea of fluidity of identity, even though he is able to envision the concept.

In many ways, Spark/Ash is a mirror character of the Fool, who also frequently assumes different identities.<sup>186</sup> In the *Fitz and the Fool* trilogy, the most significant of these alter-ego's is Lady Amber. Like Ash and Spark, these two identities are far apart. Like Perseverance, Fitz struggles with his friend fluidity: he likes Lady Amber far less than he does the Fool – despite knowing that they are, in his own words, “different facets of the same person”. There are several instances where the differences between the two identities are expressed, but the following section is perhaps the clearest example:

"I have not yet finished my tale," Amber interjected softly.

I was startled to the point of staring. The Fool never volunteered information about himself. Was Amber so different a person?

"There is more?" Malta was incredulous

"It's quickly told, and perhaps a brief telling is best for you as well as FitzChivalry. The people who held me captive, tormented me, and stole my eyesight knew that I would seek help from my old friend." She paused, and my belly turned over in me. He wouldn't. She did.<sup>187</sup>

Note the last two pronouns used: *he* wouldn't, *she* did. Fitz' perspective is clear. His friend, the Fool, would never share the painful story that Lady Amber tells so easily, immediately following the citation above. His question about Amber being a different person is answered in the affirmative.

It all comes down to the citation with which this chapter began: “There is no shame in being who and what you are. In partaking of two worlds instead of one”.<sup>188</sup> While the two worlds mentioned are the worlds of dragons and humans, the presence of characters with fluid genders and identities, and the fact that it is the Fool/Lady Amber who says this, makes it easy to apply the same principle to what this thesis focusses on: the masculine world and the feminine, and that it is not unnatural to partake in both, like Spark/Ash, like Silence, and, to greater or lesser extent, like all the other crossdressing adventurers that have been discussed.

One final topic remains to be discussed: agency. While I will not go to the same depths as Ryder and Zaerr did for *Le Roman de Silence*, a cursory overview of agency in the three modern sources should bring to light some interesting information nonetheless.

Agency is most central in the tale of Bee, Fitz' daughter. (S)he is a special case, because of the prophetic powers (s)he develops. There is a strong emphasis on choosing your own path in Bee's story, and the first time (s)he explicitly does that, (s)he at once transitions from the

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<sup>186</sup> The concept of mirror characters in Hobb's trilogy is fascinating, and I am sure an exploration of the relation between Spark/Ash and Perseverance on the one hand, and the Fool and Fitz on the other, could lead to some interesting insights about the trilogy. Sadly, this falls outside the scope of this thesis, and will have to wait for a later discussion.

<sup>187</sup> Hobb, *Fool's Quest*, p. 722.

<sup>188</sup> ---, *Assassin's Fate*, p. 330.

main character's child to a main character in her own right, one of the two who serve as focalisers. The newly achieved level of agency is reinforced by the fact that Bee becomes a point-of-view character herself. Being able to see possible futures means that Bee does not only get the chance to choose a path for herself, but also for those around her, through subtle nudging or carefully chosen words.<sup>189</sup> Ryder and Zaerr argued that the characters with the most agency are those who facilitate permanent change. On that scale, Bee, who can see vastly different futures and the paths that lead to them, certainly ranks very high.

Bee's powers are directly linked to the prophecy of the Unexpected Son, who was hunted and then kidnapped in order to control these oracular powers. This supernatural agency, then, was foretold to belong to a man. The fact that Bee, biologically speaking, is a girl, can be interpreted as a critique against the idea that agency is a masculine trait.

We find this argument more strongly embodied in Tolkien's crossdressing adventurer, Éowyn. In many ways, (s)he is an inversion of Thor. Moments before assuming the name "Dernhelm", Éowyn states, "*Where will wants not, a way opens*, so we say, [...]" and so I have found myself."<sup>190</sup> Through strong will, Éowyn has opened a way to do what (s)he feels (s)he must, despite the wishes of the king. This seems like an exceedingly clear sign of agency. Dernhelm, we are told, speaks little and keeps to himself, (s)he does not stand out and does not demonstrate much agency.<sup>191</sup> It is only when the helm is shed, and Dernhelm becomes Éowyn again, that we see the character's strong will resurface. When all other (male) soldiers flee or have been felled, Éowyn challenges the Witch-king of Angmar, and avenges her dying king.

Like Thor, Éowyn starts out strong-willed, is passive while crossdressing, and aggressive, agentive, and above all powerful when (s)he resumes her native gender. The important detail is that the genders are reversed: for Éowyn, strength and agency lie in femininity. None of the masculine characters (the king and his soldiers) are a match for the Witch-king and the fell beast it rides. Éowyn's reply to the With-king's challenge, and her own counter-challenge, speak volumes:

'Come not between the Nazgûl and his prey! Or he will not slay thee in thy turn. He will bear thee away to the houses of lamentation, beyond all darkness, where thy flesh shall be devoured, and thy shrivelled mind be left naked to the Lidless Eye.'

A sword rang as it was drawn. 'Do what you will; but I will hinder it, if I may.'

'Hinder me? Thou fool. No living man may hinder me!'

Then Merry heard of all sounds in that hour the strangest. It seemed that Dernhelm laughed, and the clear voice was like the ring of steel. 'But no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Éowyn I am, Éomund's daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Begone, if you be not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him.'<sup>192</sup>

As any reader of fantasy literature will attest, the trouble with prophecies lies in their details. It was foretold that no living man could hinder or harm the Witch-king, and so, Éowyn must be a woman when the two do battle. Important to note is that in order to get there,

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<sup>189</sup> Hobb, *Fool's Assassin*, pp. 587-8.

<sup>190</sup> Tolkien, p. 787.

<sup>191</sup> ---, p. 812.

<sup>192</sup> ---, p. 823.

Éowyn needs to first be a man – had (s)he been a woman all along, (s)he would not have been permitted to ride with the army. As such, only by being able to be both, by partaking in two worlds instead of one, or, in other words, by having a fluid gender, Éowyn is able to defeat the Witch-king, and avenge the death of her king. The *Prymskviða* tied agency to masculinity, whereas this scene links it, quite explicitly, to femininity. Saying that the lesson drawn from Tolkien's work is opposite to what can be read in the Nordic poem would be going too far. In truth, Éowyn is an exception in Tolkien's world of masculine heroes. What *can* be said, is that while there are many men who demonstrate agency, it is not an *exclusively* male trait. Women are perfectly capable of their own heroics.

Sometimes, gaining agency can be part of character development. This is the case for Polly Perks, Pratchett's protagonist. At several occasions I have mentioned that having long hair often serves as a feminine gender indicator. Éowyn's golden braid is an example of this, but it also plays a role in Polly's story. When (s)he cuts off her curls, (s)he does not outright discard them: (s)he keeps the bundle of hair in a bag, hidden away. The bag becomes a reminder, a symbol of femininity as potent as the socks in Polly's breeches. Early on, a mean-spirited, male officer named Strappi steals the bag, removing Polly's ties to her femininity.<sup>193</sup> In the terms of Ryder and Zaerr, here we see Polly being acted upon, being stripped of her former gender. Naturally, at the end of the tale, Polly gets revenge:

'And about my hair, you sticky little miserable apology for a man! Shufti's a better man than you and she's pregnant!'

'Oh, we knew there were women getting in,' said Strappi. 'We just didn't know how far the rot went –'

'You took my hair because you thought it meant something to me,' hissed Polly. 'Well, you can keep it! I'll grow some more, and no one is going to stop me, understand? Oh, and this is how far the rot goes!'

It was a blow rather than a slap, and it knocked him down so hard that he rolled. But he was Strappi, and staggered upright with a finger pointed for vengeance.

'She struck a superior officer!' he screamed.

A few heads turned. They looked at Strappi. They looked at Polly. Then they looked back grinning to what they had been doing.

'I should run away again, if I was you,' said Polly. She turned on her heel, feeling the heat of his impotent fury.<sup>194</sup>

Just like how Strappi stole Polly's femininity, (s)he now challenges his masculinity, by first calling him less of a man than a pregnant woman, and ending by linguistically castrating him when (s)he leaves him in "impotent" fury. At the same time, with this masculine act, (s)he reclaims her own femininity, by stating that no one can stop her from letting her hair grow back. Unlike Strappi, Polly's gender, fluid as it is, can no longer be taken away. (S)he is the one in control, the one with the choice.

The importance of choice returns in the final paragraph of the book. Polly encounters two girls, putting up an unconvincing masculine performance. (S)he confronts them, but not

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<sup>193</sup> Pratchett, p. 168.

<sup>194</sup> ---, pp. 449-50.

to stop them. Women are now permitted to join the army, thanks to Polly's regiment, but there is still a certain stigma. As such, the two girls thought it better to crossdress all the same. Polly tells them there are some advantages to joining as men (such as better swearwords<sup>195</sup>), but that, in the end, the choice of their gender is theirs to make. Agency is not just for men, but for everybody.

Then, to sum up: do these characters hide who they are, or do they find themselves? In the cases of Thor and Thecla, crossdressing was a way to hide. It was practical and had little to do with the adventurers' identities. Much the same can be said about Éowyn. In her case, crossdressing is the only way to reach the frontlines and fight for the kingdoms of men. (S)he hides beneath the helmet of Dernhelm, in order to do what (s)he feels must be done.

The other two sources are less straightforward. In Hobb's trilogy, Bee uses what may be considered crossdressing in order to hide who (s)he is.<sup>196</sup> The invaders came to Bee's home looking for a boy – the Unexpected Son – and as long as they believe (s)he is him, (s)he enjoys the relative safety of an important prisoner. Eventually, Bee fulfils part of the prophecy of the Unexpected Son, but her identity is not affected by this particular part of the trails (s)he must endure. Spark/Ash have a different story: (s)he most definitely finds more of herself, through being Ash.

Polly's tale presents a different kind of complication. Initially, (s)he crossdresses in order to hide in the army, but as the story progresses, I would certainly say that Polly finds herself – outside the traditional, binary gender perspective. Polly learns that male and female are both social constructs, and that switching along the scale of which those two are the extremes is easy, once you figure that out. Male or female matters little. As (s)he reminds the reader, "[i]t's all just... people".<sup>197</sup> At the end of the day, masculine and feminine are terms that relate only to people's expectations. Crossdressing, and the experiences it led to, have affected Polly's personality in such a way that it is fair to say that through hiding, (s)he has found her true self. This is a direct parallel with *Le Roman de Silence*. This shows without a doubt that the question of whether gender is binary or fluid has been in the minds of people as far back as the middle ages, and that then as now, crossdressing adventurers far and wide have learned that there is nothing wrong with partaking in more than just one world. In being precisely who and what you are, or want to be.

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<sup>195</sup> Pratchett, p. 494.

<sup>196</sup> Bee does not dress like a man in order to be more manly. As was discussed in chapter 4, (s)he simply feels more comfortable in breeches. It is crossdressing, but only on a technical level.

<sup>197</sup> Pratchett, p. 455.

## 7: Conclusion

In order to formulate an answer to my research question, I will now review my findings as discussed in the previous chapters. Once the various sub-conclusions have been discussed, all the pieces will be put together, and I will attempt to provide a clear and precise answer.

In the chapter on Gender Indicators, three main categories were identified: appearance, behaviour, and mentality – the latter exclusively in Pratchett’s *Monstrous Regiment*. The main tension of the narratives commonly depends on the relation between appearance and behaviour: a character may be able to *look* the part, but *acting* the part is often more problematic. The two categories of indicators can either reinforce each other (as was the case in the legend of saint Eugenia/Eugene), or they can clash (as in the *Prymskviða*). The most interesting result of this chapter related to how the different sources treated heroism and success in general. The medieval sources framed heroism, virtue, triumph, and success as the purview of men. The modern novels disconnect heroism from masculinity: everyone has the potential for greatness. Despite this difference, both the modern and the medieval stories have (at the very least) an undertone of empowerment. This is quite apparent in the modern narratives, but the medieval tales are empowering in their own way. Yes, triumph may be the purview of men, but sometimes, these narratives seem to tell us, women can be men as well. This change is often temporary, but despite all that, the idea of gender fluidity is very much alive here. In the previous chapter, I cited a passage from *Assassin’s Fate*, where Fitz attempts to explain Spark/Ash’ fluid gender to Perseverance by equating it to being both a father and a son. I stated, then, that while Fitz did not have the terminology to express it, he did demonstrate an understanding of what gender fluidity could be. I would argue that the medieval sources are in a comparable position. They search for something other than the static, binary view of identity and gender that is commonly held, without having the frame of reference or terminology to fully express it.

The chapter on dramatic irony was mostly concerned with the “misidentification” of crossdressing characters.<sup>198</sup> This same principle was used to achieve opposite effects in two of the case studies: in the *Prymskviða* it was used to ridicule the idea that someone might be able to cross from one end of the gender scale to the other, whereas in *Monstrous Regiment* the same motif was used to highlight how silly it is to cling to a rigid, binary gender model. *Le Roman de Silence* also contained a number of examples of dramatic irony, but of a subtler kind. Statements that at first glance appear filled with patriarchal sentiments become deeply ironic when studied in their full context. Like in Pratchett’s novel, the binary, male-biased gender system becomes the butt of the joke, not the crossdresser or the people (s)he fools.

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<sup>198</sup> I refer here to the motif where characters address a biologically female crossdressers as “man”, “boy”, “lad” or some other variation thereof. “Misidentification” is not a perfect term. If these characters perform a masculine gender, are others not correct in addressing and identifying them as men? Because a better alternative does not immediately present itself, I will use “misidentification” between quotation marks, to refer to events of this kind.



This demonstrates an awareness that precisely that binary gender model is, after all, just another construct, and that there are other options.

These findings are the building blocks required to answer the research question with which this thesis began: how does modern fantasy literature relate to medieval narratives in their representation of crossdressing adventurers, and what does this say about the exploration of gender binarity?

In my analysis, I have continuously treated medieval and modern narratives as two distinct categories. The results of that analysis, however, have shown that the two groups are not necessarily all that different – at least not in regards to their representation of crossdressing adventurers. Structurally, the overlap is significant. The narrative elements first encountered in the hagiographic sources persist in the most modern of our sources.<sup>199</sup> In every narrative, the balance between appearance and behaviour is critical to the development, and in some cases the resolution of the plot. Of course, there is also the one characteristic with which the comparison between the medieval and the modern began: the element of hope, of a belief in better times to come, and in the possibility of change.

The medieval stories, perhaps further removed from these better times, have more trouble expressing what these times might look like, and are more careful about criticising the status quo in general. This is one of the most significant differences between the two bodies of literature, and I believe that this difference can be explained by looking at the one element that has not been discussed in this thesis, namely cultural context. The more rigid, more overtly patriarchal settings in which the medieval tales originated may go a long way in explaining the “universally unsatisfying” endings, as Ryder and Zaerr phrased it, which see heroes like Silence settle for an unremarkable, traditional life at the end of their stories.<sup>200</sup> Further study in this direction would be a fine addition to the present work, which, with the aims of reaching a broad but detailed answer, could not focus on it overmuch.

It must be noted that behind this most prominent difference, we find another similarity. The different sources may approach the matter in their own ways, but they all carry the same idea within them: empowerment through fluidity and change. Silence would never have reached the same heights without his masculine, knightly skills, but (s)he would have died very early in the *Roman* without her eloquence – a trait that the *Roman* frames as distinctly feminine. Éowyn would never have been able to come face to face with the Witch-king of Angmar if (s)he had not been able to be a man, to be Dernhelm. Conversely, because of the prophecy of “no living man”, (s)he would never have been able to defeat the creature without also being able to be a woman. The most fascinating aspect of both these examples is that the empowerment of which I wrote does not come from either masculinity *or* femininity, but from the interrelation between the two – from the fact that Éowyn and Silence alike have fluid genders, which can change as the need arises.

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<sup>199</sup> This is also evident in appendix 1: Crossdressing Narratives – Structural Table

<sup>200</sup> Ryder and Zaerr, p. 22.

Crossdressing can be empowering, and not just for the adventurers in question. This is illustrated nicely in a part of Polly's inner monologue, when (s)he has discovered that the regiment is full of crossdressers:

The thing was... the thing *was*, Polly, realized, that they were no longer marching alone. They shared the Secret. That was a huge relief, and right now they didn't need to talk about it.<sup>201</sup>

Crossdressing unites, it blurs, it reduces us to "just people", equal in potential. By sharing in this secret, by living vicariously through the characters we read about, that empowerment can spread, and perhaps, in the future, those longed-for better times can become reality.

In conclusion, it can safely be said that the medieval narratives and the modern fantasy novels are not so different, when it comes to the way in which crossdressing adventurers are represented. Fantasy does not stray far from its medieval roots. If it does, it is only to follow the directions that were already set out in the older narratives, towards those elusive better times. This answers the first part of the research question, and confirms the hypothesis sketched out in the introduction, many pages past. There is no short answer to the second part of the question, concerning the exploration of gender binarity. The analysis itself is perhaps the best answer to this, but I shall try to summarize. Gender binarity has been explored, tested, and challenged, not just in recent years but also in the distant past. Some medieval authors have carefully ventured to critique the system, followed by more direct questioning (and in the case of Pratchett: ridicule) in the fantasy novels. All have made clear that both the masculine and the feminine sphere are sources of personal power, and that fluidity of gender allows an individual to draw from both of these wells. There is power in fluidity, in flexibility, in change. It might not be surprising to find components of such modern concepts as "gender fluidity" in fantasy novels, but their presence in medieval literature is all the more surprising. I hope to have demonstrated that the basic ideas that underlie the concept are not modern at all: they have been part of human thought for centuries. Gender fluidity is not some modern craze. It is something human, something we have been thinking about for centuries, but only recently have learned to put into words.

I have tried to build this discussion on a foundation of modern scholarship, with the aim of bringing together various ideas about the representation of crossdressing adventurers, and to compare the results of this with a comparative analysis based on a broad and varied corpus, in order to further the scientific gender debate. The focus has always been the sources and the ideas conveyed therein, and as such the scholarly literature played only a supporting role in the analysis. This could have been handled differently, but only at the cost of lessening the depth of the analysis, or alternatively by throwing all attempts at brevity overboard – neither of which I was willing to do. Later projects, which could perhaps stick closer to existing

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<sup>201</sup> Pratchett, p. 160.

theories than I have, and use an even wider selection of texts, *with* attention for the contexts in which these tales were conceived, would be more suited for this. For such a project, one would need a team, and not to mention a considerable amount of time. I hope that this present discussion can at least serve as a stepping stone, a way towards such a large-scale research project exploring how crossdressing characters have been represented throughout history, the world round.

The structure of this discussion proved very useful. The three core themes highlighted different aspects of the crossdressing narratives, which all contributed to the final conclusion. The order in which they were discussed, from the outermost layer to the inner core of the characters, provided a natural progression or flow to the discussion. I would recommend a similar approach for this hypothetical follow-up project, though of course a broader corpus could reveal a plethora of other, equally interesting themes. The third part of the analysis, on Identity Construction, could undoubtedly be extended to a full-scale project of its own. In short, much more work remains to be done before we can reach the admittedly ambitious goals that were set for this thesis: to demonstrate that gender binarity is just another construct, and that fluidity may in fact be a very natural way to envision gender. Regardless of that, the present discussion in itself already produced many interesting findings, and several parallels that move us some distance towards these goals. If I may end on a personal note, I would like to say that Polly, Éowyn, Eugenia/Eugene, Spark/Ash, Silence, and the many other crossdressing adventurers that have been discussed, have shown that change is possible, that we do not have to accept things as they are handed to us. That yes, things can get better.

## Appendices

### 1: Crossdressing Narratives - Structural Table

	Beginning of the journey	Preliminary Stumbling	Acceptable Performance	Superior Performance	Denouement
Hagiographies	Both saints leave home after hearing a Christian sermon	Thecla is not allowed to dress as a man until her virtue is proven	Brother Eugene is accepted by most of the clergy	Virtue recognised and rewarded, either by god (T) or men (E)	Femininity revealed (E) or living out life as a hermit (T)
Prymskviða	Mjölñir is stolen, Loki and Thor go to the land of the giants	Thrym (almost) sees through the disguise	Loki is accepted as a woman	Loki does not only ensure his own performance is accepted, but also supports Thor's	Thor reveals himself and kills the giants
Roman de Silence	In order to safeguard her right to inherit, Cadoc and Eufemie raise Silence as a boy	Confrontation with Nature and following period of doubt	Accepted as servant and student by travelling minstrels	Surpasses the minstrels, becomes a courtier and a knight	Femininity revealed by Merlin, marries a king
Lord of the Rings	Éowyn joins the Rohirrim	X	Dernhelm's presence goes unquestioned	Éowyn defeats the Witch-king	Sits out the final battle and settles down with Faramir
Monstrous Regiment	Polly joins the army	Jackrum sees through the performance right away and anonymously offers to help	Polly "Oliver" Perks is accepted as a soldier	The regiment turns the tide of the war by sneaking into a fort and releasing the prisoners	Women are allowed in the army, Polly can openly be a female soldier
Fitz and the Fool	Bee is assumed to be the Unexpected Son, a figure from the prophecies, and is kidnapped	Kidnappers are suspicious	Bee is accepted as the Unexpected Son	Bee becomes the Destroyer, a more powerful and dangerous figure from the prophecies	Prophecies fulfilled, Bee is brought back to court

## 2: Summaries of the Primary Sources

### **Saint Thecla**

After hearing the apostle Paul deliver a sermon on chastity, Thecla is moved to the point where (s)he cannot stir for days. Furious at Paul, Thecla's mother and husband-to-be rally an angry mob, capture the apostle, and deliver him to the governor of Iconium. The governor has Paul locked up until he has time to look into the matter further. Thecla bribes a guard to see him and hear more of his teachings, but the two are discovered. Paul is driven out of the town and Thecla is sentenced to be burned to death. God conjured forth a storm to put out the flames and kill a few of the people who came to watch. Thecla escapes, and is reunited with Paul outside the city. (S)he proposes to become his follower, and suggests that (s)he could cut her hair to look more like a man, but Paul tells her (s)he is not ready yet. They travel on towards Antioch, where the rich and powerful Alexander immediately falls in love with Thecla. (S)he refuses him several times, and in the scuffle his cloak is torn and his crown falls from his head. To avenge his shame, Alexander takes Thecla to a second governor: this one sentences her to death by wild animals. God interferes again, taming or killing the animals. Thecla baptises herself and is free. Dressed as a man, (s)he seeks out Paul again, who accepts her this time. Thecla is sent back to Iconium to spread the word of God. (S)he converts many people before settling down as a hermit, living in a cave.

### **Saint Eugenia**

Inspired by a Christian sermon, Eugenia flees her home, after her father tried to force her into a political marriage. Dressed as a man, (s)he joins a monastery. God shows the abbot that Eugenia is a woman, but because of her virtuous work, the abbot accepts her as a man regardless. (S)he thrives in the monastery, eventually being named provost of the church.

A noble lady becomes attracted to "Brother Eugene", and pretends to have fallen ill in order to get him alone in a room with her. She expresses her desires, but Eugene refuses her. In anger, the lady publicly accuses Eugene of having raped her. Her servants give false testimony, confirming the lady's story. Eugenia reveals her femininity in order to prove the lady's falsehood. (S)he is freed, converts her family, and travels around in order to spread the teachings of the church. Arriving in Rome, (s)he is captured by the emperor, who tries to kill her several times. Each time, Eugenia miraculously survives, until the emperor has her decapitated. Eugenia becomes a martyr.

### **Þrymskviða**

Thor wakes up to find his hammer, Mjölmir, has been stolen. He alerts the other gods, and Loki borrows Freya's cloak, which allows its wearer to fly, in order to find the hammer. He returns to tell the others that Thrym, chief of the frost giants, has the hammer, and will only give it back if he is given Freya to wed. Freya refuses adamantly, and so instead it is decided that Thor will dress up as her, reclaim his hammer, and punish the giants. Loki goes along to help him. When they arrive at Thrym's hall, the lord of the frost giants orders the festivities to begin. Several times, Thrym almost uncovers Thor's secret, but each time Loki is able to

deescalate the situation, through quick thinking. When Thor and Thrym are to be wed, Thor asks for Mjölñir to be brought out, in order to make the trade official. Thrym obliges his supposed bride. Thor reclaims the hammer, and starts fighting the giants.

### **Le Roman de Silence**

Cador, a famed knight of king Evan of England's court, and Eufemie, the wisest doctor of the land, marry and have a child. King Evan has decreed that no woman can inherit land, and so the two decide that, whatever sex the child will be, they will raise it as a son. Silence is born female, but this is cleverly hidden by the two. As the child grows up, (s)he quickly starts to excel at everything (s)he does. Nature appears, and, upset that such a beautiful girl is living a boy's life, convinces Silence that what (s)he is doing is wrong. Silence worries, but eventually Reason convinces him that it would be a shame to give up all the advantages being masculine has. Still, Silence is uneasy, and when two minstrels show up, (s)he runs away from home to follow them. They teach him music in exchange for servitude, but Silence quickly surpasses the two of them in both skill and popularity. They plot to kill him, but Silence learns of this and convinces them that it would be better if they simply went their separate ways. Silence returns to his own lands and is reunited with his family, and when the news reaches king Evan, Silence is summoned to his court, where he quickly becomes well-loved. So much so, that the queen tries to seduce him. Silence continuously rejects her, until the queen eventually, in her anger, accuses him of having tried to rape her. The king, uncertain of what to do, and not quite sure who to believe, sends Silence to the king of France, with a letter of recommendation. The king's wife intercepts the letter, and replaces it with one condemning Silence to death. Silence delivers the letter to the king of France, who welcomes him to his court before reading the letter. Having offered Silence safety, he can no longer have Silence killed outright. This causes a lot of distress at the court, and the nobles gather to discuss the matter. They convince the king to send a letter to king Evan, saying that it cannot be done. Silence becomes a knight of considerable skill, and Evan sends a letter back to clear up the whole matter. War comes to England, and Silence takes a number of close friends with him to join the fighting. (S)he rescues the king, and Silence is welcomed back at Evan's court. His wife, still angry, convinces her husband to give Silence an impossible task: find and capture Merlin, who, legend has it, can only be taken by a woman. Merlin appears to Silence in disguise, giving him advice on how to capture him. With Merlin in tow, Silence returns to court, where Merlin reveals the queen's infidelity and Silence's secret. Nature spends three days removing all traces of Silence's masculine life, returning her body to its feminine beauty. King Evan has his wife sentenced to death, and marries Silence instead.

### **The Lord of the Rings – Éowyn**

As the War of the Ring reaches its climax, the Riders of Rohan prepare to travel to Gondor, the greatest human city, in a desperate attempt to help its people fend off their besiegers. Éowyn wishes to join them, but her king tells her to stay behind and protect the women and children left in Rohan. Éowyn disguises herself as a soldier, and takes on the name Dernhelm. While in disguise, Dernhelm mostly keeps to himself. When the Riders finally reach Gondor, the battle is in full swing already. The king rallies his troops, and the riders charge into the fray. They seem to do well, until one of the commanders of the dark forces, the Witch-king of Angmar on its drake-like mount joins the battle. The magic of the Witch-king sends the horses – and many of the Riders – into a panic. The king is thrown off his horse, which lands on top of him, mortally wounding him. The Witch-king, intent on finishing the job, approaches, but Dernhelm interjects himself between the beast and his king. (S)he challenges the Witch-king, before revealing that (s)he is Éowyn and killing both beast and – with a little help from the hobbit Merry – its master. During the fighting, Éowyn is wounded. (S)he spends a long time in the House of Healing, where (s)he meets Faramir. The two fall in love, which convinces Éowyn to leave her fledgling career as a hero behind in order to marry and settle down.

### **Monstrous Regiment**

The duchy of Borogravia has been at war for so long that it is running out of willing soldiers. As a result, a draft has been instituted. Polly's brother was one of the young men drafted in such a way. Polly, always having been the one to take care of him, starts to worry when (s)he does not hear from him in a while, and so (s)he sets out to join the army herself, dressed as a man (because fighting is the work of men, after all), in hopes of finding him. After signing up, it becomes clear in what a sorry state the army is: there are hardly any capable officers to lead them, and no equipment other than the uniforms they are given. Polly has done much to prepare for her crossdressing, from cutting her hair to studying the way men walk. As time passes, it becomes clear that (s)he is not the only one crossdressing, and that the others have done less to prepare themselves. One by one, it is revealed that everyone in the regiment is a girl, save for the lieutenant (who, instead, is actually just a clerk). Knowing that fighting would be suicide for them all, the regiment seeks other ways to help in the war. This leads them to an old fort, held by the enemy, in which about half of the Borogravian soldiers are being held prisoner. By dressing as women, the soldiers are able to sneak in, and release the prisoners... but then they are found out, and both sides of the war become very uncomfortable about a regiment of girls being so heroic. The regiment is offered money to go home and keep quiet. When they refuse, they are taken to the Borogravian military command, who are then outed as crossdressing women who have been so successful that they had taken on a completely masculine mentality, complete with the patriarchal prejudices of the duchy. Polly and her regiment manage to convince them that it is time for change. The war is ended (for a while), and women are given permission to sign up for the army.

### **Fitz and the Fool trilogy<sup>202</sup>**

Fitz, a former royal assassin, is trying to enjoy his retirement, but things keep going wrong. His closest companion has seemingly abandoned him, and he has not been able to be a good father to his children – and now they are all living lives of their own, far from home. When his wife tells him she is pregnant again, he is filled with hope, but months pass without any noticeable change. Fitz begins to question his wife's sanity, as she maintains that she is with child. This puts a strain on their relationship, which only gets worse when the "pregnancy" lasts for two full years. Then, at last, an abnormally small child is born: Bee. (S)he is weak, and refuses to grow. In time, Fitz and his wife grow closer again, and their child begins to grow, albeit slowly. From her birth, Bee appears to be afraid of Fitz, and shies away when he tries to touch her. For many years, the child remains quiet, with the occasional mumble that only her mother can make sense of. Then, one day, Bee dreams of a path towards a future where she *can* speak. The fact that (s)he will suffer a horrible beating on that path, (s)he can only accept as a necessary price to pay. Bee continues to have prophetic dreams, which (s)he writes down in a journal. (S)he is still small, but when (s)he speaks, (s)he does so with the vocabulary of someone four times her age, which everyone finds highly unsettling, and which isolates the girl even more than her previous silence. (S)he clings to her mother, and does not have much contact with anyone else.

Time passes, and Fitz' wife – Bee's mother – dies. Father and daughter grieve on their own, but very, very slowly grow closer. Fitz must transition from passive father to single parent, while Bee still seems to be afraid of his touch. As Bee grows older, her powers become more potent, too, and it is revealed that her fear of her father is related to it: Fitz has telepathic powers, and when he touches Bee, whose own powers make her more sensitive to such magic, all his emotions and feelings pour into her. All that grief and regret is too much for the young Bee, and so (s)he avoids him. Fitz learns to contain his powers, and slowly, the two begin to establish a bond.

Until one day, Fitz takes his daughter to a market-town nearby, and an old friend, whom he thought had long ago abandoned him, returns. The Fool is wounded, tortured, and blind, and at first Fitz does not recognise him. When the Fool stumbles into Bee, he senses her power, and his own prophetic powers interact with hers, showing Bee the full potential of her dreams. Thinking him a beggar attacking his child, Fitz charges in to save Bee, mortally wounding the Fool. When he finally recognises his old friend, he orders his servants to take Bee home, and rushes to take his friend to the one place he may be saved: through a portal, to the kingdom's capital.

Not long after, a strange cult attacks Fitz' home, with mysterious, mind-controlling magics. They come looking for the Unexpected Son, a legendary figure with great oracular powers, who, according to their own prophecies, they would find there. Thinking Bee to be

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<sup>202</sup> I am attempting here to briefly summarise what Robin Hobb wrote in three very lengthy novels. As such, a lot of the nuance of the tale will be left out. The main purpose of this summary is to give the reader some inkling as to what the trilogy is about. To those who have read the trilogy, I can only apologise for leaving out so many details that, while extremely important to the book, do not matter much for this present discussion.



that son, they take her with them. In order to remain safe, (s)he pretends to be what they expect: a boy.

More time passes, and Fitz, still in the capital, learns of his daughter's fate. The Fool's recovery is slow, and Fitz is torn between staying by his friend's side – as he may be the only one who can heal him – and going after his daughter. He visits his estate, only to find that no one remembers the attack, or his daughter ever having been there. Perseverance, a stable boy, is the only exception: he was somehow immune to the magic. Fitz cures his people, and together with Per, returns to the capital. He meets Spark/Ash, a crossdresser, who becomes the Fool's servant, and, after a long time, they all go in search of Bee's captors. On the road, they encounter dragons, living ships, savage raiders, dragon-touched humanoids, and many more challenges. Meanwhile, Bee is brought to the cult's stronghold, where (s)he follows a very dark dream, which sets her on the path to becoming the Destroyer.

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