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High Fantasy's Gender Binary: Gender and Power in the *Wheel of Time*

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Introduction

Fantasy is one of the most misunderstood genres in literature. It is often maligned by "serious" critics and academics as derivative, immature, or problematic. Not long ago a professor pointed out that I could have read *War and Peace* in the time it had taken me to work through one lengthy fantasy novel. And to be fair, he had a point, just like the genre's harshest critics do. Many fantasy texts are highly derivative. Many of them feel juvenile and engage in problematic racial and gendered stereotypes. But there is a hidden depth to fantasy that is only acknowledged in a small handful of texts by legendary authors like Tolkien or LeGuin that I would argue is present in all throughout fantasy. These hidden depths and complexities are part of the draw of fantasy fiction. It's a genre that allows authors and readers to explore social issues in a safe space, both by reflecting real life issues and exploring the possibility of new social constructs.

One of the best examples of the genre's potential is Robert Jordan's series *The Wheel of Time*. Jordan explores issues of class, culture, warfare, and, most importantly, gender throughout his series. His representation of women and depiction of gender relations was highly complex and ambitious, especially at the time he began publishing the series, and demonstrates what the genre is capable of at its best. Jordan also fails at his ambitious task in many ways and indulges in the baser instincts of fantasy stories. *The Wheel of Time* represents the flaws in the genre, especially regarding gender. These contradictions are what make *The Wheel of Time* stand out to me. Never have I had an experience like I had reading these books where I would so often go from amazement at the complicated weave of characters, themes, and plot being used to deconstruct the fantasy genre's relationship with gender and sexuality to rolling my eyes at the outdated depictions of gender. *The Wheel of Time's* (and fantasy as a whole) conflux of sheer popularity (especially among young readers) and propensity to tackle social issues head on makes it an obvious choice to analyze in order to fully grasp what kind of worldview these stories are presenting to their readers. The best place to start is with the literary canon of fantasy fiction and the unique position *The Wheel of Time* takes in that canon.

The Wheel of Time and the Canon of Fantasy Literature

Contemporary fantasy is the latest movement in a canon that dates back to the very beginning of human storytelling. Fantasy carries on the tradition of our oldest myths, fairy tales, and folklore. In the west, fantasy evokes Arthurian legend: knights and wizards, kings and queens, and all the medieval trappings. But the connection with the fantastic—with the epic—goes further and wider than medieval Europe. Contemporary fantasy authors are drawing from a well that includes Gilgamesh and the *Ramayana*, *The Tale of Genji* and *Journey to the West*. Despite this tradition, fantasy as

a genre (especially high fantasy such as *The Wheel of Time*) is seen as being exclusively about white men in medieval European settings. Much of this can be attributed to the reactions of writers and readers following the success of Tolkien's classic *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1950s. Fantasy, and even epic fantasy, existed in some form prior to *The Lord of the Rings*, but it was Tolkien who became a phenomenon. Audiences were eager to devour more epic fantasy, and publishers were more than willing to oblige them. This led to a long period between Tolkien being published and the diverse fantasy scene of the 2010s and now the 2020s where pulp fiction and shallow imitations of Tolkien dominate the genre. And while there were exceptions such as Ursula K. LeGuin and Anne McCaffrey in the years following *The Lord of the Rings*, their influence was not enough to stop the genre from moving to shirtless barbarian heroes and chainmail bikini clad women by the time Robert Jordan arrived on the scene in the 1980s. Indeed, Jordan began his career by authoring several *Conan the Barbarian* novels, perhaps the most stereotypical, trope-ridden fantasy books in existence. The experience of writing and reading these stories are what informed Jordan as he set out to create *The Wheel of Time*.

The Wheel of Time's position in the canon of fantasy literature is that of a transition out of the era of Tolkien imitation, pulp fiction exploitation, and nostalgia and into the far more diverse (both in terms of stories and authors) era of contemporary fantasy. At first glance, *The Wheel of Time* looks the same as the decades-worth of Tolkien imitators and sword & sorcery pulp fiction that preceded it. In the early books, Jordan very deliberately calls back to Tolkien as his cast of characters are whisked from their idyllic agrarian life by a mysterious wizard and a hardened swordsman. The fact that *The Wheel of* Time positions itself as a response to Tolkien and his imitators (Jordan's contemporaries and colleagues) is concealed by its extreme length and over the top high fantasy cover art. The first three novels in the series play out the classic fantasy travel narrative, down to the hero claiming a magic sword from a stone (the stone here being a fortress called the Stone rather than a literal stone.) In many ways, Robert Jordan revels in the genre's tropes and takes them to excessive heights, but he uses those tropes to morph his tale from a simple adventure story to a sprawling, complex tale of political struggle and systemic change far more in line with the texts that would follow in its wake than the ones from the past, and it was those complex elements that made the series stand out in the 1990s. Of course, as a transitional text, *The Wheel of Time* finds itself bogged down in the trappings of the past just as often as it looks forward, and that often undermines Jordan's themes of unity, equality, and progress, especially in its representation of women.

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When Robert Jordan began work on *The Wheel of Time* in the late 1980s, female characters in popular fantasy ranged from nonexistent to shallow and tropey

archetypes that existed largely in service of male characters. The major exceptions came from the obvious sources like LeGuin while the male authors receiving the major publicity and awards in the genre were building a tradition of excluding female stories in fantasy. In her essay "'We Have Always Fought:' Challenging the 'Women, Cattle, and Slaves' Narrative," contemporary science fiction and fantasy author Kameron Hurley explains the importance of positive representation and the harm done by lack of representation through a story about scaly, cannibalistic llamas:

> And then there came a day when you started writing about your own llamas. Unsurprisingly, you didn't choose to write about the soft, downy, non-cannibalistic ones you actually met, because you knew no one would find those "realistic." You plucked out the llamas from the stories. You created cannibal llamas with a death wish, their scales matted in paint. (Hurley)

It was this cycle of misrepresentation that Jordan was trying to break when he wrote *The Wheel of Time*. Jordan's cast of characters is dominated by a diverse group of women, and not just the stereotypically "strong" female character that gets her strength from rejecting her traditionally feminine traits in favor of masculinity. The women of *The Wheel of Time* are both heroes and cowards; warriors and scholars; rulers and peasants. The variety of roles played by women in *The Wheel of Time*, along with the sheer number of women in the series, is a major aspect that sets the series apart from its contemporaries in the 90s. However, Robert Jordan's own southern, religious worldview built from a lifetime in Charleston, South Carolina, interrupted only for tours in Vietnam, color his depiction of these women, and as will become clear, this real-world influence undermines and even outright contradicts the themes of the series.

When discussing fantasy, there are a multitude of ways to classify texts within the genre, and pinpointing—to the closest possible degree—*The Wheel of Time's* classification within the genre is just as important as understanding its context. Brian Attebery's concept of a prescriptive "fuzzy set" is one that comes up consistently in analysis of the genre. This prescriptive method is most helpful when selecting texts or comparing them, but I find this method lacking. *The Wheel of Time* is similar to more recognizable texts like *The Lord of the Rings* or *A Song of Ice and Fire*, but it is also different in fundamental ways, and Attebery's method lacks specific terminology to define these texts and help in analyzing them. Another method is delving into subgenres. High fantasy versus epic fantasy or urban fantasy, and on and on. This presents the opposite problem to the "fuzzy set," as it becomes too specific. Thankfully, Farah Mendlesohn offers a solution in her book *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, where she presents four modes of fantasy in which to classify texts: the portal-quest fantasy, the immersive fantasy, the intrusion fantasy, and the liminal fantasy. *The Wheel of Time* falls firmly in the category of the immersive fantasy, which Mendlesohn describes as "…a fantasy set in a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world…as if it is impervious to external influence…" and a fantasy that "must assume that the reader is as much a part of the world as those being read about (59)" This definition provides further context for what kind of text *The Wheel of Time* is and provides a framework from which to start analyzing the series. As a textbook immersive fantasy, *The Wheel of Time* contains detailed and often complicated political, cultural, economic, and magical systems to

build its immersive world. As such, I want to begin my analysis with the world and the systems Jordan constructs within it.

The Age of Legends: Utopia and Gender in *The Wheel of Time*

In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Fredric Jameson compares the genres of science fiction and fantasy as they relate to the subgenre of utopianism. Jameson claims fantasy is less equipped to be a vehicle for utopianism, and one of the reasons he cites is the "Christian (or even Anglican) nostalgia" that is so often inherent in fantasy. Traditionally Christian values relating to gender roles and sexuality, along with heavy-handed Christ allegories, are common in fantasy. In *The Wheel of Time*, Robert Jordan's Christian beliefs come out in many of his characters and imagined cultures, especially in regards to sex and sexuality. Jordan's conservative, arguably prudish nature, is evident when the books fade away from sex scenes and when characters dance around conversations about sexuality even when it makes no sense given their cultural background. Especially g oing beyond the religious element to a more broad sense of nostalgia, it is clear how Tolkien's hobbits and their "love of good-tilled earth…and all things that grow" have popped up in fantasy for decades in different forms. Fantasy is about maintaining systems and status quos rather than reimagining them. Fantasy heroes set out to put the rightful king on the throne, not to abolish the monarchy. This is where *The Wheel of Time* sets itself apart from other fantasy books, and in many ways imitates utopian fiction.

At its core, *The Wheel of Time* is a story about changing the world. The heroes in Jordan's books abolish classist caste systems and thousand-year-old traditions. They shift the balance of social and political power, and in the end manage to establish something akin to world peace. Jordan's characters live in the ruins of utopian society and set out to rebuild that society rather than maintaining the status quo of their world. One of the most necessary steps in rebuilding that utopia is repairing the world's broken gender dynamics. In the Age of Legends, the name for the utopian period in the history of *The Wheel of Time*, men and women were wholly equal. They wielded power together in perfect balance. By the time the series begins that balance has been gone for thousands of years. The world has regressed from a high-tech paradise to a pre-industrial feudalistic society, and the reason for that regression is the divide between men and women. Instead of men and women collaborating and wielding power—both political and magical—together as equals, women now rule most of the world. In the parts of the world where men and women still share power, they either do so as separate entities, with men and women ruling over their own specific spheres of influence or forming recognizable classist feudal societies where a wealthy aristocracy exploits a peasant underclass. Essentially, this imbalance between men and women creates a matriarchal parallel of our own deeply patriarchal society, where history and culture reinforce women as inherently stronger or superior to men, just as our own history and culture subtly position women as secondary to men. Because of this, *The Wheel of Time* ultimately becomes the story of a generation of people repairing their broken, imbalanced world.

To understand the nature of how gender is portrayed in *The Wheel of Time*, you must understand how deeply it's ingrained into Robert Jordan's work. Gender, along with a binary division between men and women, is present in nearly every aspect of *The Wheel of Time*. This notion of balance between men and women being the key to building a perfect (or at least better) world goes down to the actual laws of nature in Jordan's world. The universe is built by the turning of a literal force called the Wheel of Time. As the wheel turns, it builds time and space from a power called the True Source. The True Source makes up every aspect of space and time and is split in two gendered halves. The female half is called *saidar* and the male half *saidin*. Jordan's conceit about the balance between men and women refers not only to social constructs but to the building blocks of all creation. "'Saidin, the male half of the True Source, and saidar, the female half, work against each other and at the same time together…" (*The Eye of the World* 170-171)." This idea of the masculine and feminine simultaneously pushing against each other and working together will come up not only in the magical and fantastical elements of the series, but in virtually every interaction between men and women.

This gendered magic system is a major point of contention among critics of the series, and rightly so. As fantasy author Marie Brennan points out in her article about gender in the series, this implication of an inherent binary division between men and women and certain fundamental truths about the nature of masculinity and femininity undermines otherwise positive representations of women. Another critic, Sylas K. Barrett points out the problematic nature of the system's utter disregard for nonbinary people as well as the ways the supposedly fundamental natures of men and women contradict the characterization of the women in the series, specifically the idea that feminine power is derived through being yielding or surrendering. These are all good points and fair criticisms of the series. The problem that arises is that many critics stop at the gendered magic system, often declaring it—and the series as a whole—inherently sexist. Jordan's magic system is a fundamental building block of the world and it is absolutely emblematic of Jordan's views on gender, but it is just one aspect of a complex depiction of gender and Jordan's concept of balance between the masculine and the feminine and to declare the series sexist (or especially progressive) without considering the whole text is a flawed method of analysis.

Interestingly, the idea of balance is part of the legacy of Tolkien in Jordan's work. While there are almost no significant female characters in Tolkien's work, the concept of some supposedly perfect balance between the masculine and feminine is present. In "The Feminine Principle in Tolkien," Melanie A. Rawls argues that Tolkien codes various traits as masculine or feminine, and that taking on too much masculinity or femininity becomes a source of evil or chaos. Like Jordan, Tolkien applies this gender balance to the building blocks of his secondary world:

Through *The Silmarillion* runs this theme: in Arda and in the Heavens, the Feminine and the Masculine are present; when they are in equilibrium and in harmony, there is Good, but Evil is the result of an insufficiency or a disharmony of the attributes of one or the other of the genders. Concepts of Feminine and Masculine and their attributes and roles are thus tied to concepts of Good and Evil… (Rawls 1)

This quote applies almost exactly to the depiction of balance between men and women in Jordan's work, but where the examples Rawls pulls from Tolkien are individuals, Jordan depicts an entire world that is fundamentally broken, with various nations and cultures displaying various forms of imbalance.

But what do these elements of Jordan's world building have to do with the way the series portrays the relationship between gender and power? The answer lies in its connection to magic. Like any great fantasy story, *The Wheel of Time* is full of magic, and like other fantasy texts magic simultaneously represents both a force for change and reinforces cultural and social structures. In "Magic as a Tool of Social Construction: Cultural and Gender Identity in Contemporary Fantasy," Matthew Elder writes:

> …magic acts as both a force of shaping and as a force of change; another way to look at this is that magic both binds and divides identities on both the large and small scales. It is binding in the way that societal and cultural values form around it, and it is divisive in the way that it excludes those without magic or those with a different type of magic. However magic can also be the force that bridges the boundaries that it apparently maintains; just as it can be the force that demolishes societal or individual cohesion. (Elder 25)

In *The Wheel of Time,* magic is tied to those gendered aspects of the True Source, which positions magic in *The Wheel of Time* as a tool that upholds the divisions between men and women and a tool to abolish the systems and traditions that maintain them. Women channeling *saidar* and men channeling *saidin* have access to a force known as the One Power. In the utopian age of legends, men and women worked together to channel the One Power to perform miracles and create a society without war or poverty. When the *saidar* and *saidin*—and the men and women channeling them—are in balance, the result is peace and prosperity. Magic is used to provide for all people equally. This is all abstract, however. The age of legends is just the backstory to *The Wheel of Time*. It lays the foundation for the actual story. By the time the narrative begins, the age of legends has been over for three thousand years, any semblance of balance between *saidar* and *saidin* is a distant memory, and magic is the sole dominion of women.

Within the actual narrative, the One Power is the key to the exclusively female Aes Sedai maintaining their power. Because of their ability to wield *saidar*, almost everyone in the world of *The Wheel of Time* fears or respects the Aes Sedai. Kings and queens defer to their judgment or outlaw their presence in order to avoid ceding any influence to them. Everywhere the Aes Sedai go, they carry the implicit threat of using the One Power as a tool of violence. The fact that the Aes Sedai willingly make themselves incapable of using the One Power as a weapon hardly matters; the mere possibility of entering conflict with an Aes Sedai is enough to give them almost unchecked influence wherever they go. Across all the different cultures in *The Wheel of Time*, women are able to gain and hold political and military power through their ability to use the One Power. The queens of Andor train to become Aes Sedai. The secretive Wise Ones of the Aiel lead their people. The captains of Sea Folk ships wield the One Power to control their vessels. And the Seanchan Empress commands a massive army of enslaved channelers to spread her empire and destroy her enemies.

All throughout the *Wheel of Time* women use the One Power in various ways to exert their will on the world.

Just as women use magic to gain power, they use it to deny power, both to men and to women who are unable to channel. Any woman unable to channel, or who channels weakly, is inherently lesser than an Aes Sedai in any part of the world. They use the status granted by channeling to bully and coerce other women. They use their status to claim any magical artifact that might help people. They use their power to force any woman who can channel into their ranks, regardless of what the woman wants. The Aes Sedai represent the imbalance between men and women taken to the extreme. Their power has corrupted them, and they abuse that power in order to maintain it. They have been so twisted by their unchecked power that magical strength is the only way they judge influence within their ranks. Age, experience, and knowledge do not enter into the Aes Sedai hierarchy. In *New Spring* the first thing a sister learns when she becomes Aes Sedai is how the hierarchy operates:

> "Now you must learn to compare your strength to that of every sister you meet…If a sister stands higher than you in the Power, whatever her Ajah, you must defer to her. The higher she stands above you the greater your deference." (173)

The only thing that matters is strength in the One Power. Their obsession with strength comes out when they interact with people outside their order, as they consistently think of themselves as inherently better than anyone with less or no strength in the One Power. In many ways, they are identical to entrenched patriarchal cultures in the real world. For the women of *The Wheel of Time*, this is the way things always have been, and by extension the way they always will be. Further, women—especially the Aes Sedai—have no interest in changing any status quo as they benefit from the status quo just as powerful men in the real world do.

There are other groups of female channelers besides the Aes Sedai. They also represent the flaws with an imbalance between men and women, though not as extreme as the corruption of the Aes Sedai. Among the Aiel, the exclusively female Wise Ones hold most of the power. Many of them can channel, but not all, and strength in the One Power is irrelevant to one's standing. However, they operate in a sphere totally separate from the male leadership in their culture. The male and female leaders only collaborate in the most desperate instances. The Sea Folk use the One Power to manipulate the weather when they sail. Men and women on their ships work together, but the Sea Folk channelers are forced to work alone. Then, of course, there are the Seanchan, whose channelers are enslaved. They are the backbone of the Seanchan empire's power, but they have no agency. Every major culture in *The Wheel of Time* has a group of female channelers in a position of power, and that power is somehow flawed due to a lack of equivalent male channelers.

On the part of men, the Aes Sedai hunt down and kill any man who channels the One Power. Men go in fear of Aes Sedai. They are wholly unable to trust any sister at her word, despite the fact that the Aes Sedai are ostensibly meant to serve and defend them. While death and madness are inevitable for any man who channels, the Aes Sedai never give them the opportunity to determine their own fate and take it as a given that there is no cure for the Dark One's corruption. Even when the Dark One's taint is cleansed from *saidin,* the Aes Sedai conspire to subjugate or destroy the

protagonist's newly formed order of male channelers. The Aes Sedai are so committed to the divide between men and women, and the ways they benefit from it, that they outright reject their chance to restore the balance. In *Crossroads of Twilight*, one Aes Sedai argues that working with the male channelers goes against everything the Aes Sedai stand for. Even Egwene, the protagonist whose actions are responsible for smashing much of the Aes Sedai's traditions sees alliance with male channelers as antithetical to the mission of the Aes Sedai:

> The Black Tower was a blight on the face of the earth, as great a threat to the world as the Last Battle itself. The very name suggested connections to the Shadow, not to mention being a direct slap at the White Tower. The so-called Asha'man—no one used the name without adding "so-called," or saying it with a sneer; "guardians" it meant in the Old Tongue, and they were *anything* but guardians—the so-called Asha'man were men who could *channel*! Men doomed to go insane if the male half of the Power did not kill them first…Men like this had *destroyed* the world, destroyed the Age of Legends and changed the face of the world to desolation. This was who they were being asked to make *alliance* with. If they did so, they would be anathema in every nation, and rightly. They would be scorned by every Aes Sedai, and rightly. It could not be. (573-574)

Here, we see the entrenchment of the gender divide in action. Egwene does not even consider collaborating with the Asha'man. Her preconceived notions regarding male channelers are so deeply ingrained that she rejects the possibility outright, instead deciding the only course of action is to manipulate the Asha'man until they served their purpose, then kill them all. Egwene cannot entirely be blamed as she spent her entire life raised to consider men who can channel the most dangerous thing in the world and to consider the Aes Sedai the supreme power. But this is a huge blind spot for Egwene, who otherwise spends the series working to enact massive change among the various orders of female channelers.

Most telling is Egwene's reaction to the name Asha'man, and the fact that it means "guardians." Her reaction mirrors the way men react to the name Aes Sedai: "servant of all." Just as Egwene and the Aes Sedai cannot imagine male channelers being guardians, the men of the world cannot imagine Aes Sedai serving anyone other than themselves. Of course, the Aes Sedai and other female powers are not solely to blame for the imbalance in the world. The Aes Sedai are the most powerful group in the world, so their flaws are magnified. The men—especially the male channelers—are just as responsible for the state of the world. After all, it was the ancient male channelers who went off without the women and got the world destroyed in the first place.

As far as the Asha'man are concerned, Egwene and the Aes Sedai are somewhat justified in their mistrust. The male half of the Source has only been cleansed for a matter of days at the point of that last quote, and before that male channelers were guaranteed to go violently insane. Also, the leader of the Asha'man is not only evil, but he and the story's protagonist Rand are very intentionally setting up the Asha'man as a challenge to the power of the Aes Sedai. Rand's ultimate mission is to rebuild the utopian Age of Legends, but his defining characteristic in this stretch of the story is that he is cold and calculating, only concerned with political maneuvers and shoring up his

power. Rand's intention from the start was to use the One Power to usurp the influence of the Aes Sedai and reinforce his own growing power over the world. Just as the Aes Sedai and other women use magic to uphold the status quo of the world, Rand and his male channelers use it to tear that status quo down, and they do so violently. The first scene depicting the Asha'man using their power is the perfect example of this, and in many ways it is a microcosm of all the various gender conflicts at play in the series.

When the Asha'Man come on the scene at the end of book six, *Lord of Chaos*, the actions of the male channelers upend the balance of power that has existed for thousands of years. In this scene, the protagonist Rand has been kidnapped by the loyalist faction of the Aes Sedai (the opponents of Egwene's rebel faction). A massive battle ensues as various forces try to rescue Rand or capture him for themselves. The Aes Sedai find themselves at the center of the battle and wholly unable to defend themselves with the One Power. The Aes Sedai are only permitted to use the One Power as a weapon in the last defense of their lives (note that the "servants of all" are never allowed to use the One Power to protect someone else's life), so until the fighting draws close, the most powerful women in the world are forced to rely on their bodyguards and common soldiers. The other channelers in the battle have no such limits. The Aiel, with their slightly more balanced gender roles, wield magic as a weapon against the Aes Sedai. And when the Asha'man finally arrive, they unleash the One Power against their enemies without mercy:

> "Asha'man, kill!" The front rank of the Shaido exploded. There was no other way to put it. *Caidin'sor*-clad shapes burst apart in sprays of blood and flesh. Flows of *saidin* reached through that thick mist, darting from figure to figure in the blink of an eye, and the next row of Shaido died, then the next, and the next, as though they were running into an enormous meat grinder. Staring at the slaughter, Rand swallowed. Perrin bent over to empty his stomach, and Rand understood fully. Another rank died. Nandera put a hand over her eyes, and Sulin turned her back. The bloody ruins of human beings began to make a wall. (*Lord of Chaos* 979-980)

This is, perhaps, the defining moment of the Asha'man until the very end of the series. What we see here from the male channelers is the exact opposite of the philosophy of the female channelers. The Asha'man show up and massacre thousands with *saidin* while the Aes Sedai willingly limit their ability to use the power as a weapon in order to make themselves more trustworthy to regular people. In one instant, the Asha'man have completely shattered the world's power structures. They are not only able to use their magic as a tool of violence where the women are not, they are more than willing to do so. On one side of the divide we have women artificially limiting their own power, and on the other we have men wielding their power with absolute impunity. The ramifications of this shift in the balance become clear almost immediately. Rand and his followers take twenty-three Aes Sedai prisoner, and when the Aes Sedai aligned with Rand arrive, he orders them to join the prisoners. "Kneel before the Lord Dragon, or you will be knelt," says the leader of the Asha'man, and the balance tips too far in the opposite direction. The corruption and complacency of the Aes Sedai is replaced with violent revolutionary male channelers bent on claiming the power that had been denied them for thousands of years. In attempting to fix the world by himself,

without the influence of women especially, Rand only succeeds in fracturing it even more.

Gender, Violence, and Power

What stands out about this scene is the way it displays the complex relationship between femininity, masculinity, and violence. Violence and masculinity go hand in hand in fantasy. In the time between Tolkien and the contemporary texts in the genre, these masculine displays of violence were largely displayed in a positive light. At best they invoke images of knightly chivalry in the tradition of folklore and Arthurian legends. At its worst it becomes a hollow, titillating spectacle, like we see in the books Jordan wrote prior to *The Wheel of Time*. There are exceptions to this of course, and I do not intend to claim that Jordan and *The Wheel of Time* were the first to offer more complex depictions of violence in fantasy. However, *The Wheel of Time* does represent a mix of mainstream success, influence in the genre, and critical acclaim that previous texts never achieved. We can see a rapid influx of more complex fantasy texts in the years following *The Wheel of Time*, and the success of Jordan's books are a reason for that.

In her thesis *Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things: Masculinity, Violence, and Abjection in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones*, Tania Evans describes this relationship in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series. While Evans is focused on a different text, her claims about Martin's books apply directly to *The Wheel of Time*. Not only were Jordan and Martin friends and colleagues, but Martin's books are directly inspired and influenced by Jordan's series, both in their themes and plots. Evans claims that Martin portrays violence in his books as both "inherently masculine" and "inherently monstrous" and the same principle applies to *The Wheel of Time*.

Violence in *The Wheel of Time* is tied to maleness and masculinity, and just as Evans describes in her thesis, Jordan consistently codes violence as being reprehensible or "monstrous." The Asha'm an unleashing the male half of the power with such brutality is one of the most prominent examples, but the principle rings true throughout the series. In the climax of *Lord of Chaos*, the Asha'man are technically the heroes. They come to the rescue of the protagonists at the last second to save the day. But their triumph is immediately undercut by the revulsion of Rand and Perrin and the subjugation of the Aes Sedai, which itself invokes imagery of sexualized violence. Outside of this scene, violence is portrayed as a corrupting influence for both men and women, even when it is done for supposedly noble or heroic reasons. For the men, the effects of violence appear in familiar ways. Almost all the male characters are traumatized by the violent acts they commit, witness, and receive. Rand becomes cold and closes himself off from the people closest to him. He and Mat both lay awake, haunted by the faces of the people they've killed. Lan is willing to throw his life away because of the influence of his patriarchal upbringing that values masculinity. One young man, Aram, is shunned by his family after rejecting their pacifist beliefs. All of them fight and kill for admirable reasons, but the ramifications of their actions are never ignored.

The portrayal of the relationship between violence and toxic masculinity are one of the elements of the series where Jordan's experiences and worldview shine

through. His own experiences, both in Vietnam and growing up in the conservative American south, give Jordan a profound understanding of the connection between masculinity and violence. However, that conservative worldview and decidedly masculine perspective causes Jordan's portrayal of the relationship between women and violence to take some strange turns and contain some large gaps relative to his writing about men.

Jordan portrays violence and toxic masculinity as corrupting the psyches and souls of his male characters. For the women in the series, there is little portrayal of the traumatic effects of violence. Jordan almost never portrays any kind of domestic abuse or sexual violence against women, at least beyond threats, and as such the series never deals with the effects of this kind of violence. There are dozens of female point of view characters in the series, and Egwene is the only one who displays evidence of trauma after being captured and imprisoned. But where Rand and the other male characters display the effects of acts they commit and acts committed against them, Egwene only displays trauma as a victim rather than as a perpetrator of violence. This is partly due to a failure in representation in the series. Even though there are plenty of female soldiers and warriors and women in every other role, these women are tertiary, serving as set dressing rather than fully realized characters. The roles the principle female characters take, from central protagonists like Egwene to many of the lesser point of views who have only a handful of chapters, fulfill typical feminine roles in fantasy. Laura Măcineanu lays out some of these stereotypical roles in her essay "Feminine Hypostases in Epic Fantasy: Tolkien, Lewis, and Rowling." She outlines roles like the virginal "white goddess," the shieldmaiden, the wise woman, or the temptress. By a wide margin, Jordan's main female characters fall into the wise woman or temptress category. The women who would find themselves suffering from trauma after committing acts of violence simply do not have their perspectives explored. Most of the female point of view characters are Aes Sedai or members of the nobility. These women are rarely forced to use violence, and when they do commit acts of violence, it is never portrayed as monstrous in the same way male violence is. Instead of being traumatic as it is to men, women committing acts of violence is portrayed as a corruption of their femininity.

When it comes to female warriors and fighters and soldiers, this corrupting or destroying of femininity comes up in predictable, stereotypical ways. Two of the most prominent examples are Min and Birgitte, who embody the trope of the tomboy character. They both fight and kill, and Birgitte ends up commanding an army. Both Min and Birgitte eschew traditional feminine traits. Instead they dress in men's clothes, they swear and drink and hang out with the guys. In short, they're not like other girls. The other female warrior we spend time with is Aviendha, an Aiel Maiden of the Spear. Aviendha can maintain her femininity as a warrior due to the Aiel culture having fluid gender roles. Aiel men and women have their own spheres, especially when it comes to leadership and politics, but in most cases what we would recognize as masculine or feminine roles are shared by men and women among the Aiel. When it comes to warfare and violence, women are not just permitted to fight, they are encouraged to. For Aviendha, being feminine or taking on traditionally masculine roles like warfare are not a binary choice the way they are for Min and Birgitte. She is both a woman and a warrior, and there is an entire subculture of women just like her. However, even the

Aiel have limits to moving between men and women's spheres. If Aviendha wants to get married and start a family (she does), she must give up the spears and the found family she has in the Maidens of the Spear. If she wants to become a Wise One and lead her people (she does), she must give up the spears. Aviendha and the rest of the female Aiel warriors in the series can maintain their feminine identities as warriors, but they cannot fully embrace all the aspects of their identity.

For the Aes Sedai, using their power, at least their magical power, for violence is not just forbidden, it is impossible. Every Aes Sedai takes a magical oath that makes her physically incapable of harming someone with the power unless she truly believes her life is in imminent danger. Even in times when their lives are in danger, Aes Sedai avoid fighting with the One Power on principle. Instead, they use their power to intimidate or distract rather than fight, often convincing people they are both willing and able to attack them with the One Power when they are not. The Aiel channelers again represent a middle ground. The Wise Ones are technically permitted to use magic as a weapon, but they find it inappropriate and distasteful. Again, we see that using this purely feminine power source for violence is regarded as inherently wrong or unnatural. Perhaps the best example of this is the Seanchan. The Seanchan enslave every woman who can channel and use them as the backbone of their colonial empire's military. The Seanchan channelers use the One Power to maim and kill without hesitation or remorse, but their ability to do so is the result of a truly abominable act—an absolute corruption of the natural order. A woman must be enslaved and brainwashed before using *saidar* for violence becomes natural.

Seizing vs. Surrendering: Men and Women Wielding Power

The different ways men and women wield magic or violence, or some combination of the two, helps reveal Jordan's perspective on the ways men and women exercise power. However, perhaps the most revealing aspect of the series in this regard is the language Jordan uses to describe magical power and the ways men and women exercising other forms of power upholds the principles he outlines. Robert Jordan describes the process of channeling *saidar* and *saidin* as being essentially polar opposites. In order for women to channel *saidar*, they must first "surrender" to the power's flow. Meanwhile, male channelers must "seize" *saidin* and fight against it before they can channel its power. When the women in the series begin learning to use *saidar,* Jordan uses traditionally feminine imagery, comparing the act of channeling to flowers blooming in the sun. Men are described as wrestling with a torrent of power and bending it to their will. And while this idea of women surrendering themselves to gain power while men seize power is only explicitly laid out within the magic system, this dynamic is present all throughout the series as men and women gain and wield various forms of power and influence.

This dynamic plays out in many ways throughout the series, sometimes very subtly. Luckily, it also plays out very obviously in the arcs of Rand and Egwene, the two most important characters in the series. Rand is the embodiment of seizing power. Everywhere Rand goes he takes power through overwhelming magical power, military force, or political capital. Once Rand seizes power, he immediately uses his power to enact sweeping, systemic changes in whatever city-state or nation he is in. Rand gets

his first taste of seizing power in a very literal way in the third book, *The Dragon Reborn*, when he conquers the nation of Tear. Rand enters the impregnable fortress the Stone of Tear with an army of Aiel warriors and takes the magical sword Callandor, marking him as the Dragon Reborn and granting him unprecedented magical power. With this power in hand, Rand immediately begins changing Tear's classist, caste-based society. Once in charge of Tear, Rand takes power from the aristocracy and merchants and grants the peasant underclass previously unheard-of rights and legal protections. He opens Tear to the Aes Sedai for the first time in thousands of years, forcing the people of Tear to confront their fear and hatred of women who can channel. Rand does all of this unilaterally. Most of the Tairen nobility opposes him, only following him out of fear or begrudging respect. Rand has little concern for the politics of Tear, and less understanding. He simply took power, then used it to do what he thought was right.

This pattern plays out with Rand a few more times between *The Dragon Reborn* and the seventh book *A Crown of Swords* as Rand conquers and reforms huge swaths of the world. Rand's next destination is the Aiel waste, where he proclaims himself the chief of all the Aiel. Once he becomes the leader of the Aiel, he decides to reveal a three-thousand-year old secret that immediately fractures their society and upends their worldview before opening up their holy city to be settled and using the One Power to bring water to their desert home. In Cairhien, he again topples the aristocracy through conquest and begins reforming their government to put an end to the political "game of houses" the nobles of Cairhien are famous for so he can hand the whole country to his lover, the heiress of their rival nation, which he has also conquered and subjugated. There is a scene in *A Crown of Swords* where Rand's opponents in Cairhien have installed a new queen in his absence (the kidnapping sequence examined earlier). Rand enters the palace and gives an example of what his method of taking and wielding power looks like:

> …Colavaere made a visible effort not to flinch as Rand reached out and took hold of the Sun Crown. There was a loud crack of metal snapping, and the crown flexed…slowly straightening…He held up the stretched arc of metal, and slowly it bent back on itself until the ends met…one moment the crown was broken, the next it was whole again…No one among the nobles made a sound…Perrin thought they might be afraid to… "Whatever can be done," Rand said softly, "can be undone." (142-143)

Rand walks in and overthrows a queen by sheer force of will. He ignores customs, laws, and politics, and simply acts. He unilaterally decides the future of nations. He unilaterally decides that the influence of the Aes Sedai no longer matters and offers amnesty for male channelers. Rand seizes power and uses it however he wants, making him the personification of Jordan's idea of the natural way men come into power.

Egwene parallels Rand in many ways. Both are ambitious and grow to become the most powerful rulers in the world. But Egwene's method is the exact opposite of Rand. Where Rand ignores systems and cultures to force radical change, Egwene steeps herself in different systems and finds a way to create radical change from within those systems. Egwene learns this method early under the harsh tutelage of the Aes Sedai. Egwene has to learn all the intricacies of White Tower customs and politics. Shortly after her training with the Aes Sedai commences, Egwene finds herself captured and enslaved by the Seanchan and her method of immersing herself in

cultures to claim power truly takes shape as she performs the role of a meek captive in order to learn about the strange Seanchan society and how best to undermine their growing power. These experiences in the first books are learning experiences that solidify Egwene's views on how best to come to power.

Egwene takes her first real steps toward power among the Aiel. While Rand is destroying their ancient customs and worldview, Egwene is engaging with it. She learns the ways of the Aiel, and her dedication to and respect for their beliefs wins the respect and friendship of the Wise Ones. Egwene enters the Aiel Waste as just another outsider, then engages with their culture in order to learn from them, and ultimately becomes an influential voice among the Aiel and forges a powerful alliance between the Aiel Wise Ones and the Aes Sedai that not only enforces Egwene's power and influence, but undermines Rand's. After becoming an honorary member of the Aiel, Egwene returns to find herself in the middle of a civil war between rival factions of the Aes Sedai. Upon Egwene's arrival among the rebel Aes Sedai, the leadership elects her to the position of Amyrlin Seat, ostensibly making her the leader of the faction. But the rebels only elected Egwene as a symbolic gesture to curry favor with Rand, intending her to be a puppet for the more powerful members of the faction. Instead, Egwene learns every detail of Aes Sedai law and custom, every obscure precedent in history, and weaponizes the laws of the Aes Sedai against the people trying to manipulate her. Among the rebel faction Egwene is able to use these systems to open up Aes Sedai training to thousands of women the Aes Sedai would have considered too old or too weak and finally gain almost complete control of the war against the opposing faction. Where Rand or one of the other male characters would have thrown around magic or military power to gain influence and change customs, Egwene quietly manipulates laws and customs in her favor.

Everything comes to a head when Egwene is captured by the loyalist Aes Sedai faction. Egwene is stripped of her ranks and titles and put back into training in an effort to humiliate her and force her followers to surrender. At this point, Egwene puts together her Aes Sedai training, her time as a Seanchan prisoner, her time with the Aiel, and her detailed understanding of Aes Sedai laws and customs to withstand a silent, peaceful protest against the tyranny of Elaida, the loyalist Amyrlin. Egwene surrenders to the humiliation and torture, biding her time until she can shore up her growing number of allies and overthrow Elaida. Every time Egwene suffers and refuses to lash out or fight back, she undermines Elaida's authority and gains the respect of more Aes Sedai. In the end, when crisis strikes the White Tower, Egwene is able to use the respect she's gained to save the White Tower, usurp Elaida, and end her war without firing a shot. She becomes the leader of a unified White Tower and the only person whose power rivals The Dragon Reborn.

Egwene and Rand's different experiences in coming to power give us some insight into Jordan's view of masculine and feminine power. For men, power comes from raw strength and force of will. For women, power comes from deception, manipulation, and coercion. This is one of the aspects of the series that leans into fantasy literature's past rather than looking toward its future. For all Jordan's efforts to put women in diverse roles throughout the series, his depiction of a world ruled by women is steeped in typical real-world sexism and genre tropes. To be fair, neither Jordan nor Sanderson (who wrote the scenes of Egwene unifying the Aes Sedai after

Jordan's death in 2007) depict women ruling this way as inherently negative. It's depicted as natural and inevitable. Men are rash and foolish, women are cold and manipulative, so you need them both in power to effectively run a society.

There is another method of gaining power in *The Wheel of Time*, and that is by divine intervention. Jordan introduces a phenomenon called ta'veren, which is essentially the concept of plot armor or plot convenience made into a codified element of the magic system in the series. The three principal male protagonists Rand, Mat, and Perrin, are ta'veren, which means fate and chance twist themselves around them to make increasingly unlikely events occur. These three male characters are handed this magical power while the female characters have to work and train for every scrap of magical ability or political power they gain. In her essay "Transgendered Magic: The Radical Performance of the Young Wizard in YA Literature," Jes Battis points out that similar situations play out in other fantasy stories. One of her examples of male characters being given (or at least having some natural disposition magic or other talent) abilities while women have to work for them is from *Harry Potter*: "there is also a sort of transparent gender binary of male/female at work throughout the texts. There seem to be two critical poles of magic in Rowling's world: there is *learned* or competent magic, as embodied by Hermione Granger, and then there is *intuitive* or creative magic, which Harry himself demonstrates on several occasions" (316). The mechanics of how this plays out is different in *Harry Potter* and *The Wheel of Time*, but the principal is the same: men are given what women have to work for.

The Turning of the Age: Restoring the Balance

Thus far we have seen many of the ways *The Wheel of Time* portrays an imbalanced, unequal relationship between men and women. But, as previously stated, *The Wheel of Time* is all about fixing those issues and building a better world. The characters find ways to create social change both by working with in the systems of their world and by smashing those systems outright. The fascinating choice Jordan (and Sanderson) make is to not show the reader the ultimate result of those changes. In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Fredric Jameson says that the utopian—the authors, the texts, the actual revolutionaries—are focused on finding ways to repair the broken elements of society rather than detailing new descriptions of "bourgeois comfort" (12). Along these lines, *The Wheel of Time* stops short of detailing this potential utopia. It shows us the problems, it shows us the ways people fought to change them (or fought against changing them), and leaves the reader to decide if their efforts were enough to build a new Age of Legends.

In the previous sections I examined the relationship between male and female magic users and the parallels between Egwene and Rand's rise to power throughout the main body of the series. In this section, I will re-examine these relationships in the final chapters of the series. The best place to start is where I just left off, with Rand and Egwene. The two characters enter book fourteen, *A Memory of Light*, as the most powerful rulers in the world. Everyone fighting for the light is split between their two factions, between loyalty to The Dragon and loyalty to the Amyrlin Seat. The fate of the world rests on these two characters—the most powerful man and the most powerful woman—finding a way to compromise and share their power. The two enter

the negotiations displaying the same traits they used to get to this point. Egwene is quiet, calm, calculating power balances and using her friends to gather information on Rand. Rand comes in making demands. He insists on having supreme, unilateral authority over every aspect of the upcoming conflict as well as forcing every nation in the world to halt all attempts at expansion and enter a peace treaty. He even threatens to refuse to fight The Last Battle and let the world be destroyed if all the other rulers refuse any of his demands. Predictably, they make no progress and come dangerously close to going to war with each other. What turns the tide is Rand and Egwene taking on strategies that Jordan previously coded as inherently feminine or masculine, respectively. Rand stops making demands and begins making compromises for the first time since coming to power. He relents on many of his demands, even surrendering possession of the seals to the Dark One's prison (the largest point of contention in the conflict) to Egwene. Egwene, meanwhile, abandons subtlety and manipulation. She makes her demands and she refuses to back down for any reason. Rather than biding her time and letting her opponents move against her, she uses Rand's tactics against him and uses the full weight of her power without concern for the reaction of Rand and his allies. She is prepared to go to war with The Dragon Reborn to do what she thinks is right.

Neither Egwene nor Rand get to the point where they can work together on their own. They both see their own friends and allies taking on these traits and making these same compromises to their "natural" roles in the lead up to the last book. Egwene witnesses Aes Sedai eschewing their traditional cold, manipulative methods to great success. Characters like Nynaeve and Cadsuane go against both Aes Sedai custom and Jordan's constructed natural gender roles, and their influence shows her that women (and Aes Sedai) don't need to move in the shadows or manipulate people to gain and exercise power. Rand watches his friend and arguably closest ally Perrin come into his own as the ruler of their home the Two Rivers, and Perrin could not do that without the influence of his wife Faile. Faile shows Perrin that there is more to masculinity than being "strong" or hard and that there is nothing wrong with stopping to think and examine a problem instead of rushing in and smashing everything the way Rand does. Rand sees Perrin and Faile's method of leadership grow his sleepy farming village into a massive, diverse, prosperous city. And this speaks to the larger theme of *The Wheel of Time*: it's not about Rand or Egwene. It's about everyone, from the most powerful to the weakest. All their efforts come together to change things.

For the Aes Sedai and Asha'man, a restored balance means finding new roles and identities in a changing world. Among the Aes Sedai, this means reclaiming the duties they had abdicated. The Aes Sedai are split into different groups called Ajahs, each with a different focus. The Green Ajah exists to fight the armies of the Dark One, the Yellow Ajah are healers, the Brown Ajah are scholars, and the Red Ajah hunt down male channelers. Yet when the series starts, there are no green sisters fighting Trollocs, there are no yellow sisters healing the sick, and the brown sisters hide their knowledge behind the walls of the White Tower. It's only at the very end that these groups of Aes Sedai are seen fulfilling their supposed roles. Only the red sisters maintain their duty to the world, and in the end, they are forced to rebuild their identity in a world where *saidin* is no longer tainted. Where the other sisters simply take the step of engaging directly with the world instead of pulling the strings of rulers from the shadows, the

Red Ajah have to build a new identity and role from the ground up. What that role will be is not entirely clear. Some sisters take Asha'man as warders. Some change ajahs. One sister and one Asha'man—Pevara and Androl—discover something new. They find a way to link together and share their powers. It redefines the relationship between the Aes Sedai and male channelers. Prior to their discovery of an equivalent sharing of control while linking together, circles (the name for groups of men and women linking their powers) had to be controlled by men. This was true even in the supposedly balanced utopia of the Age of Legends. It is only through the collaboration of a red Aes Sedai and a male channeler—two natural enemies—that a truly equal form of sharing power is discovered.

Like the Aes Sedai in the Red Ajah, the Asha'man must find a new identity after The Last Battle. When Rand created the Asha'man, he created them for the sole purpose of fighting the Dark One; little more than warm bodies to throw at the war effort. They were specifically trained to be living weapons and put through grueling, dehumanizing training to prepare them for their mission. With the fight against the Dark One coming to an end, Logain, the leader of the Asha'man, is forced to confront what the future means for him and the men he is responsible for. Throughout the fighting, he is obsessed with claiming a weapon that will allow him to protect the Black Tower from a world built to hate men who can channel. He becomes obsessed with maintaining the Black Tower at the cost of everything else, which is exactly the mindset that led to the Aes Sedai abdicating their roles as servants of the whole world. In the end, though, Logain rejects his obsession and chooses to embrace the role of being guardians, the same thing Egwene refused to believe before. He abandons his chance at ultimate power to rescue innocent people, and one of the women he rescues tearfully promises to have her son tested for the gift (not the curse) of channeling, and Logain declares, "'the Black Tower protects. Always'" (*A Memory of Light* 1119). In that moment, the Asha'man and Aes Sedai are positioned to protect and serve the world, together, and the balance between women and men—between *saidar* and *saidin*—can begin to be restored.

Conclusion

The focus of my analysis of *The Wheel of Time* has been on gender, but the changes the characters enact on their world also concern race, class, and technology. *The Wheel of Time* is a massive, complicated series, and even my focus here has barely scratched the surface on gender politics in the series. There are positive and problematic representations of gender politics and women in *The Wheel of Time* that I missed here. One omission I want to address is the lack of analysis of the changes in the series once Brandon Sanderson took over writing after Robert Jordan's death. While there are fairly significant changes to the style and even structure of the books, Sanderson was ultimately a hired gun. Any decisions or changes he made to Jordan's notes and drafts had to be approved by Jordan's editor (his wife) and others from TOR Fantasy. I ultimately decided that Sanderson's contributions had very little change to the representation of gender in the series—especially in relation to the most important characters.

With that addressed, I want to return to the complexity of *The Wheel of Time*, because that is what draws me to the series and the fantasy genre as a whole. Further, I think it's what makes fantasy books worth analyzing. Books like *The Wheel of Time, The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter,* and on and on sell millions of copies to a diverse audience. They represent a space to explore our ideas about the world and our society, and they in turn reflect our values back to us. In the case of *The Wheel of Time*, we're discussing a series with millions of readers—many of them young and impressionable—being fed a specific view of gender, and as Kameron Hurley describes in "We Have Always Fought," readers internalize the worldview fed to them by literature. Fantasy is a wildly popular genre. *The Wheel of Time* has sold millions of copies. *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* and *A Song of Ice and Fire* have sold millions of copies. There is a demand for these stories, and these stories are informing the worldview of their readers. I believe it is the responsibility of scholars to understand what popular texts like this are telling their readers, and what draws people to them in such large numbers.

The Wheel of Time serves as a perfect case study of the genre. Its position in the history of fantasy as a transitional text means it provides elements of the genre's past as well as making overtures to the genre as it stands today. It shows the potential for the genre as a space to challenge cultural norms and imagine new ones as Robert Jordan works to reconcile his traditional worldview with the rapidly changing world of the 1990s and early 2000s as ideas surrounding gender and sexuality rapidly shifted.

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