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Gender, Nature, and the Fairytale Structure in Robin McKinley's Works

Molly Rogers

Robin McKinley is an American fantasy author who uses fairytale structure to explore themes of gender and nature. Her first book, *Beauty*, a retelling of "Beauty and the Beast" was published in 1978. She continues to write fairytales and other fantastic fiction, utilizing the fairytale form and structure. She has won a few awards, including the Newbery Award in 1985 for her novel *The Hero and the Crown*. Her latest book, *Pegasus*, was published in 2010. Jack Zipes describes McKinley's heroines as:

self-confident, courageous young women who take the initiative in a world which they help to define with men...it is the woman who dares to oppose tyranny, to seek alternatives to oppression...for McKinley there is no reason why women cannot live the lives they choose for themselves if they are willing to struggle and surmount obstacles, which apparently hinder men, too, from realizing their identities (23-24).

The books discussed here exemplify McKinley's protagonists that come to realize their identities through finding self-confidence and courage. *The Blue Sword* (1982) is the sequel to *The Hero and the Crown*, which deals with themes of colonization and bravery in the face of the unknown. *Spindle's End* (2000) is McKinley's retelling of "Sleeping Beauty," full of talking animals, a magical countryside, and a princess who dares to save herself. *Sunshine* (2003) is a vampire story, where contradictions can't quite stay contradictory, and an ordinary book-loving, cinnamon bun-making woman is unexpectedly thrust into fighting vampires. *Dragonhaven* (2007) is the tale of Jake, a boy who lives in an isolated national park and finds a baby dragon. These books were chosen out of McKinley's work for their emphasis on gender and nature, themes that are never far away in McKinley's books. McKinley offers a portrait of nature as a place where non-traditional events may occur and she creates strong, independent protagonists

who aren't content to just do as they are told. McKinley uses fantasy fiction to provide examples of drastic change to *status quo*.

McKinley's works fall under the genre of fantasy fiction, and it is important to clarify what that term connotes, and how "fantasy fiction" differs from other genres. Ursula K. Le Guin asserts, "fantasy is nearer to poetry, to mysticism, and to insanity than naturalistic fiction is" (*Lang*. 84). She refutes those that would label fantasy as imaginary and hence poor in value. Its "insanity" perhaps reflects its potential for non-traditional images, ideas, and social constructions, while its "mysticism" and "poetry" speak to its underlying truth. Le Guin also describes fantasy as "the language of the inner self" (*Lang*. 70), further supporting its inherent truth despite its aspects of the marvelous. In his essay *On Fairy Stories*, J.R.R. Tolkien too defends the genre; he says: "Fantasy is a natural human activity...It was in fairy stories that I first divined the potency of words and the wonder of things (54, 59). He underlines the naturalness and inevitability of fantasy literature, and its power for possibilities ("the potency of words"). In *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, W.A. Senior declares, "In the hands of Ursula K. Le Guin...Robin McKinley...and others, the quest fantasy is an ever-changing portal that leads us into the heart of the human condition" (199). The fantasy genre hence reveals a potential for creativity, invention, and truth.

Max Lüthi, a Swiss scholar studied the significance and implications of fairytales in the modern world, with the conclusion that fairytales contain universal truth. In his work *The Fairytale as Art Form and Portrait of Man*, Lüthi declares the fairytale to be the "true portrait of man...[The fairytale] seems...to have validity independent of time and place, and it is made doubly impressive by the fact that it is presented not realistically

but with marvelous alienation” (150). Lüthi illustrates a contrast between the universality of fairytales and their alien nature. The fantastic, alien nature of the fairytale brings its utter truth, despite its resistance to reality. Lüthi underlines the importance of “marvelous alienation,” a reference to the fantastical nature of the fairytale. Because the fairytale doesn’t have to strictly stick to reality, it can propose new and different kinds of truths, such as McKinley’s worlds, where women have the opportunities for independence and destinies other than the fairytale happily-ever-after ending. Lüthi believes the fairytale to embody all the characteristics of men (in the general, human sense of the word): “Limitation and freedom, integration into the whole but preservation of the identity of the individual element, stability and dynamism, clarity and mystery, recollection and anticipation, and reality and utopia are bound up into its narrative form and the history of its transmission, just as they are into the nature of man himself” (166). Lüthi discusses contrasts further, but these preliminary oppositions reveal the universal nature of the fairytale that can be many different things at once.

If the fairytale is the nature of man, changes to the fairytale become changes to how society conceives of itself. Certain fantasy authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin attempt to change the traditional fairytale story structure, towards a type of heroism that rejects power structures and traditional feats of bravery and derring-do. In writing *Tehanu*, a later book in the Earthsea series, written years after the first three, Le Guin tried to create a heroine whose “acts and choice do not involve ascendance, domination, power over others, and seem not to involve great consequences [or a] public triumph over evil” (*Earthsea* 13). In *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, Catherine Bulter refers to these characteristics as an “alternate heroism” countering power as the

path to success (230). Le Guin's Tenar becomes a hero by the force of her love for Tehanu, an abused child, and for how strongly she will defend Tehanu from the society that allowed her hurt. She does not swing swords or go on quests. Le Guin tweaks the fairytale structure, creating a story that does not revolve around domination, power over others, and public triumph over evil. As the fairytale represents the nature of man, according to Lüthi, Le Guin takes steps through her writing to change the nature of man, heroism, and stories. McKinley "praise[s] *Tehanu*'s clear-sighted 'recognition of the necessary and life-giving contributions of female magic—sometimes disguised as domesticity'" (Hunt and Lentz 66). Providing new and "necessary" patterns for young readers to emulate shifts the focus of fairy stories towards equality and away from power. Authors like Le Guin and McKinley perform "life-giving" changes to the fairytale that extend its universalism and influence.

When Zipes describes McKinley's heroines as "self-confident, courageous young women," he raises the question of feminism. Le Guin and the translator of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* both discuss the "weight of tradition" on both society and stories (Parshley 10). H.M. Parshley indicates the "strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition" that have enforced women's secondary standing in society (9). McKinley's books attempt to bring a new force in education to negate unequal representations of women. Le Guin labels these enforcers of patriarchal tradition in a more poetic manner: "The beauty of your own tradition is that it carries you. It flies, and you ride it. Indeed, it's hard not to let it carry you, for it's older and bigger and wiser than you are. It frames your thinking and puts winged words in your mouth" (*Earthsea* 10). Despite fantasy's creative potential, Le Guin describes how thoughts are framed by

what has come before, and tradition's influence is strong enough to be an unconscious force on authors. Le Guin animates tradition into a living thing with power over society. This living tradition creates the patriarchal, achievement-concerned tradition in which an "alternate heroism" is necessary for equality between people, where "conquest" is not the answer to the conflict, in which conflict may not even be necessary. Le Guin tries to reinvent a world outside of tradition where old practices such as Tenar's housewife role are re-valued and stories do not necessarily revolve around a swashbuckling hero. McKinley follows in this tradition of reevaluation, and her novels demonstrate an evolving trend towards new understandings of gender and power in society. *The Blue Sword* falls much more into the dominant structure of winged tradition, based on conflict and ending in a marriage and happy ending. McKinley's later work exhibits more innovative ways of conceiving power and transmitting it. In *Spindle's End* the princess saves herself while bringing balance to her world; *Dragonhaven* follows in *Tehanu's* footsteps of the hero-mother. *Sunshine* subverts power structures by making it unclear just who has power, and what their aim might be. Despite the prevailing nature of tradition, Le Guin and McKinley both manage to explore new ways of telling traditional stories that, as Lüthi posits, can change the way society sees itself.

Diana Wynne Jones and Marcia K. Lieberman discuss the archetype of the passive princess that McKinley tries to disrupt and reinvent. Jones's *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* is a mock encyclopedia of the attributes of the fantasy genre. Her entry on princesses shows the flat characterization that has traditionally been the lot of women in fairytales:

Princesses come in two main kinds: 1. Wimps. 2. Spirited and willful. A spirited princess will be detectable by the scattering of freckles across the

bridge of her somewhat up-tilted nose. Spirited princesses often disguise themselves as boys and invariably marry commoners of sterling worth. With surprising frequency these commoners turn out to be long-lost heirs to kingdoms (150).

Jones's entry illustrates the lack of options for the princess. Either she is entirely passive (a wimp) or, even though she may go on adventures, she still manages to end up married. To further uphold tradition, she is not even often allowed to marry a man below her social standing, due to the peasant's penchants for turning into princes. Marcia K. Lieberman asserts, "the helpless, imprisoned maiden is the quintessential heroine of the fairytale" (192). She underlines the commonplace nature of the passive princess. McKinley's heroines Harry, of the *The Blue Sword*, Sunshine, and particularly Rosie of *Spindle's End* certainly do not let themselves stay helpless or imprisoned for long. McKinley's heroines fit into Le Guin's category of characters who use their power to foster respect and understanding rather than to assert dominance. Zipes questions the extent to which McKinley has succeeded creating Le Guin's "alternate heroism," saying: "McKinley is often naïve and too facile in the manner in which she depicts women assuming active roles" (23). McKinley's heroines do inhabit fairytale worlds, and are aided by other wise characters, yet it shall be up to the reader to determine the naïveté of McKinley's work.

Nature, the wilderness is an archetypical place in fairytales where change and transformation may occur. Nature's link to fantasy may be defined in many different ways. Tolkien describes the land of Faërie: "the realm of fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted, beauty that is an enchantment and an ever-present peril, both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords" (3). In Tolkien's wilderness, possibilities

are endless and appearances are not to be trusted. Tolkien's fantastic description of Faërie shows how nature can be an important grounding element in an unrealistic environment that gives a basis to which the reader can relate. While Tolkien sees nature as a many faceted force that is part of the magical realm of Faërie, Max Lüthi discusses nature's role in fairytales as a stand-in for something else. He references the fairytale tendency to pass through a forest made of gold or silver, rather than trees and leaves: "Nature is frequently transposed into the metallic... This rigid, metallic quality satisfies the sense of beauty of the listener to fairytales more completely than the living breath of actual nature, the disorderly profusion of shrubs, bushes, trees, flowers, grasses and mosses in actual forests. It is not the beauty, but rather the danger and adventure potential of the forest which stand in the foreground of the fairytale" (16). Rather than focusing on the rich diversity of nature, Lüthi contends that fairytales are interested in the forest as a setting that does not necessarily subscribe to the normal rules of society. It is a place where subversive events might take place, far from society's regulation. Finally, Le Guin emphasizes nature as a basic human need: "Wilderness scares us because it is unknown, indifferent, dangerous, yet it is an absolute need to us; it is that animal otherness, that strangeness, older and greater than ourselves that we must join, or rejoin if we want to stay sane and stay alive" (*Cheek* 106). In Le Guin's formulation, nature is so essential that it is unsurprising to find it a theme in fantasy literature. To conclude, each of these three authors emphasize a different aspect of nature and its function in fantasy literature—its natural complexity, its potential for danger and subversion, and its essentiality.

Le Guin equates nature with the Other, with unshared experience in society: “the wilderness that is utterly other...what civilization has left out, what culture excludes, what the Dominants call animal, bestial, primitive, undeveloped, unauthentic—what has not been spoken, and when spoken has not been heard—what we are just beginning to find words for” (*Dancing* 163). Wilderness, like fantasy, is a place where new things may be invented, where old traditions may be set on edge and redefined. Le Guin equates freedom with power (*Earthsea* 23) and as a free space, the forest is a place where people may have the power to enact change. In her books, McKinley displays the changeable nature of the forest, as a place that may be a home, a refuge, a retreat from society, a space of transitions, a space ungoverned, a location of natural beauty, of subversion, of danger, as a place of prison and escape. The notion of wilderness and its plurality fits snugly within Ursula K. Le Guin’s redefinition of power, and of the fantasy genre’s possibilities for change and reformulation of status quo.

In her book, *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction*, Annis Pratt also implies a connection between fantasy and the space of the other. To paraphrase, fantasy allows the conception of worlds with different social structures and rules than our own, hence it is an interrogative space, where alternative possibilities may be dreamed of, and insights into un-heretofore looked for opportunities for the Other may arise. Hence, because of the liberty and possibilities limited only by the imagination, fantasy is the ideal place in which to construct Le Guin’s alternate heroism, or for McKinley’s protagonists to resist traditional fairytale structure. In *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, Veronica Schanoes quotes Rosemary Jackson who says that fantasy is “a means of expressing ‘that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems’

(246). *Dragonhaven* blatantly deals with actions that are both outside the law and dominant value systems. It is illegal to save a baby dragon, and many in Jake's world would question the morality of such a choice. Schanoes also says "fantasy represents the ways of knowing and making sense of the world that are excluded by the dominant discourse of history" (237). Harry's actions in *The Blue Sword* investigate ways of understanding the world that lay outside the dominant discourse of the Homelanders who are colonizing and creating the history of Daria. Harry finds greater acceptance and fulfillment in the society of the Hillfolk than in the Homelander society of her birth. Rosemary Jackson asserts "The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: That which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" (4). In *Sunshine*, the idea of collaboration between humans and vampires has been made so absent that it is unthinkable, and Sunshine's actions reformulate the boundaries of possibility.

In her book *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Farah Mendlesohn describes the characteristics of immersive fantasies: "the immersive fantasy is a fantasy set in a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world...it reveals what is frequently hidden: that all literature builds worlds, but some genres are more honest about it than others" (59). Through utilizing nature as a subversive place, and questioning the traditional gender roles of the fairytale, McKinley proposes new worlds, with new rules that function. The success of her fantasy is that it works for her female characters to assert their independence and reject the passive princess mold. Through her works, McKinley proposes new worlds with new, feasible ways of living and understanding the world.

The following chapters will explore McKinley's portrayal of gender and nature, and the extent to which she participates in forming an alternative heroism. *The Blue Sword* will be discussed through the lenses of colonialism, and the force of the happily-ever-after ending. *Spindle's End* introduces the idea of a heroic mother, and explores the roles of animals and nature in the protagonist's life. *Dragonhaven* develops the role of the heroic mother, and provides discourse on the awareness of what sort of story is being told. Finally, *Sunshine* delves into the conception of Otherness, and widens one's perspective of the possible. McKinley displays an example-based form of feminism that is not discursive, yet shows her values through her characters' actions. She demonstrates nature and fantasy's possibilities for reimagining the world.

Colonialism and Identity in *The Blue Sword*

"In you two worlds meet. There is no one on both sides with you, so you must learn to take your own counsel; and not to fear what is strange, if you know it also to be true...It is not an enviable position being a bridge" (179). So says the wise man, Luthe, to Harry, an orphan who must bridge the gap between the free Hillfolk culture of her new home, and the colonizing Homelanders of her heritage. Robin McKinley's *The Blue Sword* (1982) raises questions of the link between fantasy, nature, fairy tales and colonization. Homelanders and the Hillfolk (the colonizers and those still resisting colonization) and order versus wilderness are major opposing forces, yet as the story progresses, the protagonist, Harry manages to resolve these oppositions through her search for an identity that spans Homelander and Hillfolk, captive and lady hero. Unlike in McKinley's later work, *Sunshine*, binaries aren't disrupted but Harry's decisions bridge the opposite worlds. Harry's choices refuse to let binaries such as Homelanders and Hillfolk, magic and reason, nature and empire stand in opposition to each other, as she connects them in herself and her actions. Robin McKinley uses the fairytale structure, particularly the happy ending to resolve conflict, integrate seemingly irreconcilable forces, and create an idyll where opposites can exist in harmony.

The protagonist Harry (a nickname for Angharad) comes from the Homeland, a verdant, prosperous country. She travels to the far continent of Daria, part of the Homelander empire, to live in the same town as her brother, after the death of her father. There are four major groups of people in Daria, the colonizing Homelanders, the Darians who have conceded to the Homelanders, the free Hillfolk who refuse to yield to the colonizers, and the Northerners, the inhuman enemies of the Hillfolk. The town of Istan,

where Harry is to live, is on the border of Homeland possession of Daria, near the great desert of Damar, still populated by free Hillfolk, unbound by colonial rule. There are just a few Hillfolk left, who come to the embassy in Istan to ask the Homelander's help when they are threatened by a great Northern army. Corlath, the Damarian king, is compelled by magic to kidnap Harry and bring her to live among the Hillfolk. Harry is trained to become a warrior, a *damalur-sol* (a lady hero). When the Hillfolk ride to war, Harry gets into a disagreement with Corlath, as he refuses to see the tactical threat posed by a certain pass in the mountains, through which the Northerners could attack Istan and come around to catch the Hillfolk from behind. Harry chooses to desert Corlath's army and beg the help of the Homelander's to defend this pass. In fact, the Northerners have concentrated much of their force at the pass, the Madamer Gate, and Harry's small force defeats them with help from her ancient magic sword. She returns to the Hillfolk and is welcomed by Corlath with a marriage proposal. They live happily ever after in their mountain kingdom, free from the threat of the Northerners or the Hillfolk.

The characterization of Homelander's and Hillfolk creates a binary between the two societies. The Homeland is a patriarchal, hierarchical society, where younger sister Harry has no place to go after the death of her father, as their poor country estate is entailed to her elder brother. *The Blue Sword* does not quite offer a critique of colonization. The novel is situated eighty years after the Homelander's invaded Daria, when Homelander control is certain throughout most of the continent. The imposition of the Homelander's upon the Darrians is clear, yet with the Homelander domination no longer in question, the violence of one civilization imposing itself upon another is avoided. The Hillfolk are still free to follow their ancient customs, but the Homeland

considers them to be so far on the periphery as to be beyond notice. The discrepancies between the two societies are more strongly emphasized than any intimations of the violence that must have gone into the contact between the two. Harry asks her new friends the Peterson sisters about the lack of Darian culture in Istan, and they tell her: “The Darrians that do work for you, or with you, are very anxious to prove how Homelander they really are, and loyal to all things Homelander, so they won’t talk; and the others won’t for the opposite reasons” (28). The divide between the Homelander culture and the Hillfolk is absolute: either the Darrians attempt to assimilate completely, or they try to ignore Homelanders completely. Harry’s kidnapping is a catalyst which changes this dynamic to facilitate communication.

Although it is not explicitly stated, the complete control of the Homelanders over Daria is expressed in the names. Daria is what the Homelanders call the continent they have conquered, although, the region that Harry inhabits is called Damar by its natives. Colonisation also affects the name of the town to which Harry moves: “The town’s name was Istan, after the natives’ Ihistan, which was deemed too hard to pronounce” (6). In some cases, Homelander names retain nothing of their native predecessors. Colonel Jack Dedham, of the Homelander regiment in Istan and Harry discuss the pass which Harry wishes to protect from the Northerners: “the Bledfi Gap, we call it—the Gate of the North, you know, in the Horfel Mountains—’ Jack said from a cloud of smoke: ‘The Gambor Pass, in the Ossander Range” (204). The discrepancies in the names of concrete places symbolize the impossibility of communication between Hillfolk and Homelanders who know nothing about each other. Jack and Harry are Homelanders who trouble themselves to learn about Damar, but many more are like the Petersons who may have a

slight curiosity, but accept the silence that surrounds Damarian culture. The Hillfolk, or Damarians, as they call themselves, call the Homelander the Outlanders, rejecting their power. Yet this rejection is important only to the Hillfolk, as the Homelander retain the dominant power of naming in the continent.

The descriptive language furthers the dichotomy between the two cultures. Harry anticipates the visit of the Hill King to Istan, and the reaction of her hostess Lady Amelia, the wife of the Homelander ambassador; she laughs at: “the thought of proper little Lady Amelia offering sandwiches with the crusts neatly trimmed off, and lemonade to this barbarian king” (18). Harry contrasts the propriety of the Residency with the imagined barbarity of this unknown king. The word *barbarian* particularly has connotations of colonization and ideas of otherness, people who are different from a certain society and hence looked down upon. The Homelander think the Hillfolk are barbaric because they do not understand their customs and they refuse to believe in their magic.

Incomprehension becomes the root of the differences between the two societies.

The Homelander’s similarity to nineteenth century colonists extends to include their technology, and their means of spreading their empire. Daria is separated from the Homeland by an ocean, as India from Europe. The Homelander have expanded their influence and dominion by building railroads through Daria. Harry travels on one of these railroads herself to reach Istan. However, the Homelander wish to mold the landscape, through the extension of the railroads, runs into the obstacles of the isolation and rugged terrain of the Hills. The Homelander can only expand their empire so far, before colonization is impeded by geography. The Hills have remained unconquered due to their geographic isolation and rugged terrain. Geography is an impartial force that

may only be molded so far to aid Homelander colonization, even as it can only limitedly protect the Hillfolk.

In the hills of Damar, in the free Hillfolk kingdom, the binary between colonization and magic also links fantasy and colonization. The Hillfolk royalty possess magic that the Homelanders refuse to believe in. Harry, Sir Charles, and Colonel Jack Dedham have a conversation introducing Harry to these Hillfolk:

“You haven’t been here long enough to have heard any of the queer stories about the old rulers of Damar?” “No,” she said. “Well, they were sorcerers—or so the story goes. Magicians. They could call the lightning down on the heads of their enemies, that sort of thing—useful stuff for founding an empire.” Sir Charles snorted. “No you’re quite right; all we had was matchlocks and enthusiasm” (15).

Stubborn pragmatism and tenacity allowed the Homelanders to conquer Daria; by disbelieving in magic, they managed to subdue the majority of the Darian continent. The Homelanders rely on technology (“matchlocks”) for empire building, while the Damarians have *kelar*, a magic power that resists technology and allows the Hillfolk to persist in freedom. It is *kelar* that has sustained them for so long out of the reach of the Homelander Queen’s wish for an orderly straight, square boundary. Jack Dedham tells Harry how Homelander technology tends to malfunction when used in battle against the Hillfolk: “things like rifles—or matchlocks—misfiring, or blowing up; not just a few, but many—yourself, and your neighbor, and his neighbor. And their neighbors. A cavalry charge just as it reaches full stretch, the horses begin to trip and fall down as if they’ve forgotten how to gallop—*all* of them” (16). Magic, and their remote location is what has allowed the Hillfolk their autonomy in contrast to the beaten down, “domesticated” natives that Harry sees in Istan. The Homelanders are prosperous, disbelieving capitalists who do not believe that there could be a supernatural reason for which they could not

control territory. Magic hence allows freedom and autonomy to the Hillfolk, in their last bastion of unconquered territory.

The Homelanders persist in their disbelief of magic, even when faced with proof. Jack tells Harry about battle against the Hillfolk, but few Homelanders actually believe his seemingly fantastic stories, “probably” just inspired by the chaos of the battle. When the attack of the Northern army is imminent, the Homelanders find the corpse of a Northern spy who is not completely human. The narrator describes the reaction to this inhuman corpse: “The physicians had nervously announced they didn’t know what the thing was they were looking at, but, whatever it was, they didn’t like it” (271). The Homelanders want to categorize, understand, and control their world; they embody the orderly half of the order—wildness dichotomy. There are a few different implications of the doctors’ reactions. Do they dislike the corpse because its evil nature is so inherent that it can be divined just through its appearance? Or do they dislike the strange corpse because it defies all of their previous understanding of science? The Hillfolk ask the Homelanders for help against the Northerners, because they believe that even human enemies should band together against the malevolent non-human Northerners. It is entirely possible the doctors simply sense the wrongness of the Northerner. However, the Homelanders do like to categorize and dominate a society; the existence of previously unsuspected creatures creates a chink in their understanding of the world. The Northern corpse destabilizes Homelander notions of order and science, and creates the question of whether or not the Homelanders can continue their disbelief in the magical land they have conquered.

The natural world in *The Blue Sword*, an integral part of the continent, is exploited through colonization. The Homelanders deplete the natural resources of Daria, such as the abundant orange trees and the fruitful mines for their own gain. Harry learns about Istan on the train:

Istan had lately become a place of some importance in the governmental network the Homelanders had laid over the country they had conquered eighty years before. It was still an isolated spot, and no one went there who didn't have to; for it was at the edge of the great northern desert of the peninsular continent the Homelanders called Daria. But thirteen years ago the Aeel Mines had been discovered in the Ramid Mountains to the northwest, and in the last eight years the Mines had been officially declared the most profitable discovery on the entire Darian continent, and that was saying a great deal. The profits on oranges alone paid the wages of half the civil servants in the Province (7).

The names themselves—the Ramids, the Aeel mines, and Daria itself—are not native, but rather the names the Homelanders have assigned to these conquered places. Part of the success of the Hillfolk in holding out against the conquerors is the fact that their home is not considered profitable to the Homelanders; the desert is not a place that many people want to go. Nature, hence, is part of the Hillfolk's defense against the Homelanders, as it is the Homelander's own devaluing of the desert that allows them their sanctuary. Nature is an integral part of both societies—it is exploited for profit by the Homelanders, and an important part of the Hillfolk's defense against them.

In contrast to this exploitative view of nature, Jack Dedham proposes a secret society of those who truly love the desert. Harry tries to enumerate this society at interminable dinner parties, trying to pick out those Homelanders who do not just see the economic possibilities of the land around them. She herself is one, thinking:

The desert, with the black sharp-edged mountains around it was as different from what she was accustomed to as any landscape could be; yet she found after only a few weeks in Istan that she was falling by degrees

in love with it: with the harsh sand, the hot sun, the merciless gritty winds. And she found that the desert lured her as her own green land never had—but what discovery it lured her toward she could not say (20).

The allure of the desert is so aberrational that the like-minded Homelanders do not talk about it amongst themselves. The Damarian desert is certainly not idyllic, it is a “harsh,” “hot” place that entices and attracts those of a certain perspective. It encapsulates mystery, a physical representation of the mutual ignorance that separates the Homelanders and the Hillfolk. The desert appears as a place that might yet unite these open-minded Homelanders who love the desert with the Hillfolk, and hence escape or subvert the traditional narrative of colonization. Harry thinks about her assimilation to Damar: “She did remember that she had been born in a far green country nothing like the *kelar*-haunted one she now found herself in...and she remembered a Colonel Jack Dedham, who loved the Hills even as she did. A thought swam into her mind: perhaps we shall meet again, and serve Damar together” (119). Nature serves as a bond that unites such disparate people as Corlath and Mathin, an intimidating Hillfolk king and a taciturn horse-breeder, Harry, a misfit young girl attempting to learn the Damarian way of life, and Jack Dedham, an aging colonel in the Homelander military. Nature becomes a place where unlike people may unite and change the status quo.

When Harry is kidnapped by the Hillfolk, she is drawn into the natural world that she has looked at out her window every morning since living at the Residency. She finally enters that other world that she has dreamed of, yet not by choice. It is a land populated by a strange people, with different language, food, customs, and clothing than her own. This is its own sort of wilderness that Harry must navigate, helped by a mysterious sense, or affinity that gradually makes it easier for her to assimilate, which

she discovers is *kelar*, or a type of magic that the royal family of the Hillfolk possess. There is an opposition between the “far green” Homeland, that seems idyllic and simple and the magic “haunted” land of Damar, rich with mythic undertones. Even representations of the natural world, are not in agreement, giving different meaning in different places. It seems like an unknown, mysterious place, like the unknown Damarian culture that Harry faces.

Harry chooses, after her kidnapping, to stay in the desert and learn the ways of the Hillfolk. It could be argued that she has no where else to go, in a hostile wilderness, yet Harry chooses to embrace the Damarian culture and learn its language and customs, rather than stay a bewildered captive, hiding in a tent. She also realizes that she does not have much to return to in the patriarchal Homelander society where she has no family but her distant brother, and no real home. The consequences of this choice awaken Harry’s own *kelar* that aids Harry as she familiarizes herself with Damar.

When Harry questions Corlath about their acceptance of her, and about her warrior training, he tells her that it is because of what she has seen with the Water of Sight, a substance that comes from a lake in the Hills, with prophetic properties when drunk by a person with the right intuition. Harry first saw, which does not happen to everyone, and spoke in the old language of Damar under its influence, the language used “when Damar was one land, a great green land before...’ Before my people came, she thought, but she was not going to say it aloud if he was not” (100). Color is important in both representing nature and prosperity. The Homeland is often described as a green land, and it is the Homeland that has the power to conquer others at the moment. Corlath reveals that before Damar was reduced to a small desert sliver, it too was green. Harry

assumes that Corlath is referring to the Homelander invasion as the reason that Damar is no longer green and prospering. Yet *The Hero and the Crown*, the prequel that occurs hundreds of years before *The Blue Sword*, tells of some of the natural devastation of Damar that was caused by the battle with the Northerners and the spirit of the black dragon Maur. Certainly the Homelanders have caused much of the downfall of the Damarian civilization, yet Corlath's incomplete sentence, promulgates a lack of communication between the two cultures. These misunderstandings and polar assumptions between Hillfolk and Homelanders provide a complex background of pre-made assumptions and colonial history for the choices that Harry makes.

Harry's decision to disobey Corlath and go to defend Ritger's Gap, the Madamer Gate (the northwest gap through which the Northern army could sneak and catch the Hillfolk from behind) shows the gap between Harry and both the Homelanders and the Hillfolk. Corlath does not feel that the Madamer Gate poses too much of a threat, but Harry cannot believe him. Luthe, the wise magician that Corlath consults as they ride to war, tells Harry: "in you two worlds meet. There is no one on both sides with you, so you must learn to take your own counsel" (179). Harry herself inhabits an interrogative space that is unique, in which new possibilities may arise. She is the link between the colonizing Homelanders and the resisting Damarians. She, carrying the mythical Blue Sword, is the link between the past and the present, Aerin's more prosperous Damar of *The Hero and the Crown*, and her own. As a character who raises questions and crosses boundaries, Harry has the power to affect change, in many different categories including how the Homelanders and Hillfolk conceive themselves as different. As Harry enters the Homelander fort and talks to Jack Dedham, she fears that she is not a good bridge after

all, that by any choice that she makes she will betray part of herself. Jack's revelation that her great-grandmother was a Hillwoman helps resolve these forces that tear Harry apart. Through this newly discovered blood relation, Harry finds a legitimization for acting against Corlath, an idea that she really can work for the Hills by disobeying his orders and the strength to do so. She is also not completely deserting the people of her birth, as it turns out that she too is of the Hills, which is why she possesses the magical *kelar*. Through Harry's greater self-knowledge, she finds the certainty that she is trying to do the right thing that will ultimately give her victory. Harry is uncertain about daring to make a drastic choice, yet it is the daring of this choice that ultimately truly allows her to be a bridge between the two cultures.

Upon Harry's triumphant return from the Madamer Gate, Corlath proposes marriage. Previous to Harry's departure, their relationship has been portrayed as cool and uneasy, master to pupil. It is Corlath who kidnapped Harry, and he constantly seems intimidating and distant, if willing to help Harry out if his kingly schedule permits. He treats her with utmost honor, yet his is often absent, and Harry often feels awkward around him. Harry is uncertain of her welcome back from the Madamer Gate, since she ran away and disobeyed the king. He welcomes her with open arms and a proposal of marriage. This proposal seems incongruous, as none of the usual trappings of courtship or romance accompany it. Corlath and Harry have never kissed, or had any previous romantic encounter. This surprising romance seems to pull attention away from romantic idealization, and rather focus on Harry's heroic deeds and complex choices as a bridge between two worlds. It makes it evident that *The Blue Sword* is a tale of finding a place in the world, and of defending one's home and lifestyle, rather than a love story.

If *The Blue Sword* is about self-discovery, rather than love, why include this unexpected romance? Perhaps the answer lies in the power of the fairy tale ending, which through force of tradition, imposes itself upon this story [?]. Fairy tales almost invariably end in felicitous marriage; often the hero or heroine goes through their trials specifically for the purpose of marriage. Ursula K. Le Guin evokes the fairy tale ending in *Earthsea Revisioned*, and discusses the power of tradition: “It frames your thinking and puts winged words in your mouth” (10). It seems that Harry’s marriage is the effect of “winged words,” the inexorable “happily ever after” that seldom extends beyond the marriage itself. Amelia A. Rutledge discusses McKinley’s early penchant for the traditional fairy tale ending in her article “Robin McKinley’s *Deerskin*: Challenging Narcissisms” (2001):

Each of McKinley’s major novels has centered on a young woman’s quest for identity that merges with the traditional courtship plot, and each tends to identify masculine authority as the definitive field of self-authentication. In the early novels, *Beauty* (1978), *The Blue Sword* (1982), and *The Hero and the Crown* (1985) [sic], women are not passive or void of aspirations; each is in her own way a rebel against societal constraints. They all need the more perceptive male characters, mentors, and/or suitors, to see them as they ‘really are’ and teach them so to see themselves (182)

Rutledge identifies the “traditional courtship plot” that overtakes *The Blue Sword*’s focus on Harry’s identity. Harry does indeed have numerous male mentors, in Corlath, her teacher Mathin, and the wise magician Luthé. In McKinley’s early novels, the force of the happily ever after fairy tale ending is strong, resulting in independent, free-thinking Harry’s marriage to Corlath.

Often in fairytales, the marriage concludes the narrative, offering no more insight than the blanket of “happily ever after” into the further lives of the characters. In Harry’s

case, the tale is not quite concluded, stretching to include 4 happy children, named after herself and her friends, and diplomatic recognition and negotiation with the Homelander government. The negotiation with the Homelander government seems unequal and not quite enough to resolve the tensions between the large Homelander empire and the small, waning Damarian kingdom. The Damarians do not invite any Homelanders except Sir Charles and Lady Amelia to the City, and only a few Homelanders like Sir Charles bother to learn to speak in the Hill language. Perhaps the Hillfolk have lost the threat for a time of Homelander expansion, but they are still few and the Homelanders many. This unequal peace and recognition seems tenuous at best. To consider again the weight of the traditional happy ending, Harry previously was free to forge her own path, to disobey Corlath, to reconcile her identity between those of Homelander and Hillfolk. Instead of choosing to exploit that link to bring mutual understanding to the two peoples, she instead chooses to be queen to Corlath's King, to raise her children in isolation of the problems that the mass of greedy Homelanders at their border pose. *The Blue Sword* hence seems to offer a more simplistic happy ending that does not enact significant change. Harry has made revolutionary choices, but their implications remain conservative. In succumbing to "masculine authority as the definitive field of self-authentication," and becoming Corlath's queen, Harry's tale becomes more of a traditional fairy tale, and less of a story of rebellious self-identification (Rutledge 182). Harry still provides an example of a strong female protagonist in the fantasy genre. She manages to balance and reconcile two conflicting identities, to reach a state where she is comfortable with herself. She does not have a need for a male counterpart, although she is quite happy when he presents himself. She has been a courageous hero throughout the

novel, and her transition to motherhood implies that being the mother of four children is also a type of heroism. *The Blue Sword* offers binaries between Homelander and Hillfolk, colonization and nature, magic, and wilderness. Harry herself is the agent that draws these opposing forces together and shows that they are not irreconcilable opposites. McKinley draws on fairytale tradition, and hence the ending of *The Blue Sword* positions Harry into the traditional role of mother; Le Guin speaks to the weight of the happily ever after traditional ending that falls easily into place. In McKinley's later works this fairytale ending does not insert itself unquestioned. *The Blue Sword* shows Harry's development from captive, hero to queen, and as Harry resolves the oppositions that surround her, shows that even with a traditional happily-ever-after, Harry can further resolve contradictions to become both a wife and an independent woman.

***Spindle's End* and “Sleeping Beauty”: A New Pattern of Behavior for Female Characters**

Spindle's End (2000) is McKinley's retelling of “Sleeping Beauty” in which animals and nature play an intrinsic role in her reformulation of the fairy tale. McKinley's tale enriches plot elements of the original story, gives the traditionally passive princess more agency, and offers new directions for the traditional fairy tale pattern. *Spindle's End* poses questions of fate, of destiny, and whether or not they can be avoided. It explores the impartiality of nature and continues the theme of animal actions throughout the novel. *Spindle's End* provides a view of nature that is both friendly and domesticated, and unpredictable and changeable. In *Spindle's End*, countryside is opposed to the city, and magic is a tangible dust that powders the entire set. Animals play an active, rather than subordinate role in setting the events of the book in motion—they go out of their way to help the princess evade the spell of the evil fairy. Their help manifests itself physically in Rosie (the princess), and evokes the question of the importance of the debate of nature or nurture. Contrasts between magic and common sense, the arcane and the ordinary, which are often encapsulated within the same character or situation.

Spindle's End begins with a characterization of the magical world in which it is set, full of magic dust, yet a place where ordinary people are distrustful of anything magical, especially fairies. The king and queen of this land have finally had a baby girl, and are so overjoyed that they have invited a person from each village to come to the christening. The first-born child is always next in line for the throne, but it is thought that a queen is better able to resist magical attacks than a king, so evil fairies cast spells

warding against female heirs. The kingdom is overjoyed with the news of an heir fifteen years after the king's marriage, and few remember that the last queen, four hundred years ago left some unfinished business with an evil fairy. In a far off corner of the country called the Gig, Katriona, a young girl who lives with her fairy aunt is chosen to go to the christening. On the morning of the christening, a man in the crowd hands her an amulet. This amulet helps her withstand the magical storm that accompanies the evil fairy's arrival and cursing of the princess at the christening. It is Katriona who recovers first, and stumbles to the side of the cradle, where Sigil, the queen's fairy hands her the baby and tells Katriona to raise her and keep her secret. Katriona's journey back to the Gig is long and arduous; she can't take any main roads in daylight, for fear of being discovered. Animals give her milk for the baby along the way. When she finally returns to the Gig, she and her aunt raise the princess as their own, calling her Rosie. Three times during Rosie's childhood, she is almost discovered by Pernicia, the evil fairy, but she remains oblivious, making friends with the smith, Narl, and her neighbor Peony. When Rosie approaches her twenty-first birthday, the royal fairies find her, and they develop an elaborate scheme to nullify Pernicia's spell. Peony is presented as the princess, in hopes that she will trigger the spell, but not be able to fulfill its terms, not being the princess. A party is hosted for the princess's twenty-first birthday, during which Pernicia's spell is triggered. The entire castle falls asleep except Rosie, Narl, and the animals. They travel to Pernicia's castle and destroy it, narrowly escaping back to the Gig. Pernicia comes to the grand hall, and fights with Rosie, resolved only when the merrel, Rosie's hawk friend sacrifices himself to kill Pernicia. It is Rosie's kiss that awakens Peony, and finally breaks the spell. Peony stays the princess, and returns to the city to marry Rowland, the

prince whom has been masquerading as the smith's apprentice for a few weeks. Rosie stays in the village, marries Narl, and presumably lives happily ever after.

The "Sleeping Beauty" tale highlights a few important moments, which *Spindle's End* echoes and changes, to bring more realism to the tale. Prominent elements of the traditional "Sleeping Beauty" tale, collected by Andrew Lang in 1889 in *The Blue Fairy Book* include the sorrow of the king and queen over their childless state, seven fairy godmothers who are given gifts, and the old neglected angry fairy who creates the curse. One fairy has hidden behind the curtains, guessing the anger of the old fairy would cause trouble. She reduces the fairy's curse from death to sleep. On the princess's sixteenth birthday, she is running about the castle, and finds an old woman in the tower who does not realize that spindles have been banned. The princess is curious, and asks to see the spindle, and pricks her finger and falls down asleep. The good fairy puts everyone in the castle to sleep, and briars grow up around the castle. One hundred years later a prince is out hunting and comes upon the castle. The briars part for him, but no one else in his party. He comes upon the princess and wakes her, and they fall instantly in love and live happily ever after.

Many of these basic elements appear in McKinley's tale, yet are often accompanied by significant changes or development. The old fairy, Pernicia, in her version is not angry because she wasn't invited, or doesn't have a gift, she shows up in revenge against the last queen of the country, four hundred years ago. Pernicia has complete control over the spell. The fairies of the realm cannot wave their wands and reduce the power of her words. Pernicia drags out her cursing, making the spell more and more horrifying. Unlike Lang's version, which skips the princess's childhood, Rosie's

life with Katriona and Aunt is described in detail, providing her skills with which to defeat the evil fairy, and showing how her unusual upbringing for a princess has helped her escape detection. In McKinley's kingdom, the curse on the princess is common knowledge, and the princess would have never unwittingly stumbled into the tower. The fact that Rosie doesn't know she's the princess pulls some of the weight off a child who would have to live with the knowledge that they could die any time. Rather than banning spindles, in McKinley's kingdom, they widen the end of the spindle so it could not be used to fatally prick someone. Pernicia has to stick Peony with it; Rosie does not wander idly into Pernicia's trap. It is Rosie who solves her own problem with Pernicia, and who wakes the sleeping Peony, rather than Prince Roland. McKinley's changes create a less passive princess who is in control of her own destiny and can act definitively to change it.

The animal helper in folktale is a common trope, such as in "Kari Woodengown," "East of the Sun, West of the Moon," and "Puss in Boots" although it is traditionally absent from the "Sleeping Beauty" tale. In "Kari Woodengown," the bull sacrifices itself to help the princess achieve her goals. In "Puss in Boots" and "East of the Sun, West of the Moon," the animals help the people, while also helping themselves. "Puss in Boots" is the story of a clever cat who helps his less-clever master, while "East of the Sun, West of the Moon" tells the tale of a prince, spelled to be a bear who helps a poor family in return for their youngest daughter, who unbeknownst to her, should free him from his curse, except that she cannot restrain her curiosity right when the spell was about to be broken. *Spindle's End* reformulates these categories, as the animals help Rosie out of genuine affection and friendship. The slavish devotion of the bull is absent, along with the arch manipulation of Puss in Boots, or the ignorance that causes disaster for the bear.

Traditional animal helper roles are not entirely absent, as the merrel sacrifices itself to save Rosie. None of Rosie's particular friends are humans transformed into animals like the bear of "East of the Sun, West of the Moon," but there are hints that this is possible in McKinley's magical world. Animal helpers and human protectors such as Katriona and Narl work together to keep Rosie safe. Rosie has a humble sort of cult of personality that gives her true and loyal friends both animal and human to aide her defeat the fairy's evil spell.

Katriona's journey back to her home of the misty Gig after she has acquired the princess at the christening represents a valorization of the mother as hero that McKinley will repeat in *Dragonhaven*. She attains hero status through the privations that she goes through to protect the baby in her care. Katriona must avoid roads and human habitation, equipped with no food for her new baby. Katriona's gift of speaking to animals aides her journey as animals offer her milk for her baby. After a first encounter with a fox, Katriona finds that "some kind of word had gone out among the animals that there was a baby walking west and north in the arms of a fairy woman not her mother" (49). This network of animal mothers giving milk to the princess allows Katriona and Rosie survive on their months long journey back to the Gig. Katriona's journey tests her endurance, her perseverance, and her willingness to adopt Rosie into her family. Rosie does not easily fall into Aunt's life, as Katriona did years earlier when her family sickened and died. Katriona must struggle to keep her alive and bring her safely and unnoticed back to the Gig.

As Rosie grows up with Aunt and Katriona, it seems that Katriona's journey and the milk from the animals has marked her. As Rosie grows, Katriona finds "when she

was watching Rosie with only half her attention she was often startled into full heed by a turn of Rosie's head, a look in her eye, a tip of her chin, underscored, perhaps, by a gesture of her hand, a drop of one shoulder, a playful leap: and Katriona was reminded briefly but intensely of a fox, a badger, a wildcat, a doe" (73). Rosie's qualities recall those animals that nursed her question the influence of the natural world that results from animal help. Rosie is affected in quite physical terms—her gestures and her movements. The characterization of the fox as sly opens the door to further attributes traditionally applied to different species. Hence this description further characterizes Rosie with stereotypical associations that belong to each animal such as playful like a fox, stubborn like a badger, fierce like a wildcat, and sweet like a doe. Animals are seen to act not just in aid of humans, but on them. Rosie's animal characteristics invoke the "nature versus nurture" debate, yet here it is nature who is nurturing.

Nature is an acting force in *Spindle's End* that chooses allegiances (to Rosie, to the Gig). At first, nature seems a benevolent force that is always giving, and willing to help Rosie. It is not just a backdrop, a setting in which the plot unfolds, but rather an active force that has the power to affect and change events in the story. A multitude of animals give their milk to Rosie to help her survive her journey to the Gig. She has befriended animals in the Gig such as the horses, the hounds, and the captive merrel, a kind of hawk that lives at Woodwold, the manor of the Prendergasts with a broken wing. Woodwold itself grows the fence of roses to keep evil out, rather than Rosie in when the curse is triggered. However, there are certain instances where nature is an aid to Pernicia. "Bdeth" is a type of herb Aunt used for magic, until one of the times that Pernicia almost found Rosie. Aunt subsequently decided its location too close to the ominous wasteland

where unbeknownst to them, Pernicia has been hiding, and the nature of death too uncertain. Plants and animals hence play an active role in determining Rosie's fate.

Magic is an every-day presence in McKinley's fairytale world that manifests itself as accumulating dust that causes strange things to happen such as food or animal transformation. The first sentence of *Spindle's End* lays the tone for the land: "The magic in that country was so thick and tenacious that it settled over the land like chalk-dust and over floors and shelves like slightly sticky plaster-dust. (Housecleaners in that country earned unusually good wages)" (3). Magic is slightly irritating, very common, and normalized by comment about the housecleaners. In this fairy tale land, fairies deal with the magic, helping people so that their household appliances might stay untransformed, and performing other tasks such as potions for healing and amulets for protection. Despite the quotidian nature of magic, fairies are held in a bit of suspicion; the narrator says: "Didn't farmers grow more stolid and earthy over a lifetime of farming? Wasn't it likely that a lifetime of handling magic made you wilder and more capricious?" (7). The people value steadfastness in this world where magic is so rampant that bread may transform beneath one's eyes. Magic here is thus itself a force of nature, an integral part of the composition of the land.

Nature's intimate link with magic in this world can be affected by such great events as Rosie's showdown with Pernicia. Pernicia says to Rosie: "One of us must die, you know; the magic will pull your whole dreary Gig apart else" (329). Magic and nature hence are inextricably entwined in a relationship that requires satisfaction. In the aftermath of the confrontation between Rosie and Pernicia, the narrator describes the land: "all over the Gig there was wreckage as if by tiny, violent, very local storms, or

duels among goblins or a fire-wyrm or two” (344). In this mythical world, natural destruction suggests the possibility of magical disruptions (goblins or fire-wyrms). The comparison to small storms or destruction by mythical creatures suggests that a goblin or fire-wyrm attack might be as common an event as a storm. In any case, the physical effects of Rosie and Pernicia’s duel on the land further the entwining of magic and nature.

The animals in *Spindle’s End* fulfill their role as animal helpers most thoroughly in the final scenes of the book. Pernicia’s sleep has affected all of the humans in the castle save Rosie and Narl, but all of her animal friends are still awake. The horses, the dogs, and a fox aide Rosie and Narl to destroy Pernicia’s castle, and then an army of wild animals protects Rosie and her horse Fast as they gallop back to Woodwold. In these scenes, the animals are able to do what the humans cannot. Pernicia underestimates their strength and Rosie’s affiliation with them. She does not see the threat posed by the animals that populate the Gig, and hence has a weakness in her power. The animals then have an intrinsic role in breaking the longstanding power of Pernicia. The animal who takes this to the farthest extreme is the merrel, a hawk who has been chained to the beams of the ceiling in the great hall for years. The merrel was captured with a broken wing, and knows he could not fly for long, but he only longs for one final flight of freedom. Narl throws a bolt forged of iron and magic, a mammoth feat, pairing two incompatible forces to release the merrel, who is the only one with eyesight sharp enough to distinguish Pernicia from Rosie in the obscuring cloud of Pernicia’s magic. As they fight, “The merrel stooped so swiftly that neither of them saw it, neither of them nor Pernicia either; lightning is slower. The merrel’s talons seized Pernicia and wrenched her

out of Rosie's slackening grasp as Woodwold opened a gulf in the earth just beneath them" (338). The merrel is the embodiment of a savage longing for wildness and freedom. Rosie is the only one who has bothered to talk to him and care for him in the long years of his imprisonment. Rosie could not have prevailed against Pernicia without the help of the animals and Woodwold, particularly the merrel who sacrifices himself for her. Rosie's world is more egalitarian; humans are not privileged above other species. Humans like Narl perform great feats, but others are also not above being servants of Pernicia, or not quite strong enough to defeat her evil. This collaboration between humans and animals proposes a world where everything, even houses must work together to protect what they love and value. The merrel's last words to Rosie as he dives by are: "*Goodbye, friend*" (347). Friends, human and animal, are working together to destroy evil. The animal helpers create a collaborative atmosphere which lends itself to a more empathetic, caring society.

Just as magic becomes more of a physical force with its relationship to nature, the quality of being a princess has become tangible. Rosie managed to evade the curse for so long because she managed to develop qualities like talking to animals that a princess couldn't possibly have. Still, the animals of the land recognized her and called her princess. Yet, when she wakes Peony from the spell, Rosie transfers her quality of being the princess to Peony. Fate, magic, and self-determination are all at play in the complex ruse used at the end of the novel to perplex and disarm Pernicia's pernicious curse.

The christening is an important early scene in the fairy tale departs from the traditional "Sleeping Beauty" pattern. The narrator focuses on Katriona, relating the events from the perspective of an "unimportant" bystander who watches the queen lay the

princess in her cradle, although “Katriona saw nothing of the princess at all...nothing but a bundle of gold and white and lavender (31-32). As a member of the crowd, Katriona echoes the fairy in the original tale who stays unseen until the evil fairy has cast her spell by hiding behind the curtains. Katriona provides commentary on the sorts of gifts the fairies give to the princess, and deplors their impracticality: “Katriona nearly fell over. Golden hair! Golden *hair*? What an utterly idiotic gift! Aunt had always taught her that you were *respectful* of your magic!...‘Skin as white as milk.’ She’ll have to live under a royal parasol all her life, then; skin like that burns indoors, with the shutters closed” (33). Katriona brings a pragmatic view that is often missing in more sentimental traditional fairy tales. Magic, hence is a serious tool used in everyday life, not to be used frivolously. Katriona does not hear all the gifts, due to her placement in the crowd. The gifts are often emphasized in the traditional fairytale; this change highlights the importance of Katriona’s unplanned gift, which gives Rosie magic and allows her survival. The results of the christening transform it from simply the baby’s name day, to an active protection of her life against Pernicia’s curse.

The traditionally simple characters of the fairy tale gain more depth in McKinley’s retelling of “Sleeping Beauty”. When Pernicia arrives, she draws out the horror of her curse. First she claims she was going to allow the princess to grow happily to her majority, but then she curses the princess to fall into a poisoned sleep and die at the age of twenty-one. Then again she adds that she must prick her finger on a spindle, and finally decrees that “*my disposition of her future may happen at any time*” (37). The prolongation of the course adds to the horror, and shows Pernicia’s enjoyment in manipulating the emotions of the crowd. Katriona was mysteriously given an amulet by

a male fairy just before the christening commences, that gives her the strength to withstand Pernicia's angry force as she disappears. It is Katriona who is the first to comfort the baby, and gives her the twenty-first gift, her ability to talk to animals: "it is the only useful gift anyone has given you all day" (38). The queen's fairy, Sibyl gives the baby to Katriona to hide, despite the fact that "You are still only a child yourself. My poor dear" (39). Katriona both hesitates and accepts the child at once: "I—but" began Katriona, appalled [at the idea of hiding the princess herself], but unconsciously easing the princess against her till she fit comfortably against her own breast and shoulder" (39). Katriona accepts the role of premature mother, eventually becoming a sister figure for Rosie (as she will come to call the princess). Both Katriona and Pernicia are more complex characters than the original story proffers. Pernicia is more evil, more manipulating; Katriona is McKinley's invention, yet her choices are more nuanced than the characters of the original tale. McKinley's retelling adds a moral complexity absent to the original tale that brings a taste of real life to the fairy tale.

Animals remain important to Rosie throughout her life, as it becomes apparent that she can speak to them (despite the royal family's traditional non-possession of any sort of magic). She befriends the taciturn smith, Narl, and learns the art of horse leeching, through which she makes many animal friends both in the rural village, and at the lord Prendergast's manor. These characteristics distance Rosie from her identity of princess, and help confuse Pernicia, the evil fairy as she searches for the princess. The fact that Pernica may be confused by these characteristics shows a conception of princesshood as a list of characteristics that specify what a princess should be. Rosie doesn't fit this list, so manages to evade Pernicia. In this land, the spouse of the ruler is

chosen carefully so that there shall not be a drop of magic in the blood of the ruling family. Katriona's humble gift of beast speech allows Rosie the time to grow into a strong young woman who can defeat the evil fairy herself.

As the day grows near for Rosie's twenty-first birthday, Katriona, Aunt, and two of the queen's fairies devise a ruse to confuse Pernicia's spell that declares that Rosie will die. Rosie has a best friend in her neighbor, Peony. Their bond is so close that they have absorbed some of each other's mannerisms (an echo of Rosie and the nurturing beasts) and they may not have to finish sentences around each other, as they know what the other is thinking. The fairies set out to strengthen this bond even more, so that the spell is confused as to who is the princess. They will present Peony as princess to the world, which will hopefully trigger the spell, yet not harm Peony as she is not actually the princess. Peony should act as a deflecting substitute that will activate but derail Pernicia's curse. As the date grows closer and closer, potential flaws arise, but it is their only and best plan. One hint towards a flaw is the queen's recognition of her daughter. When the king and queen arrive at Lord Prendergast's manor; although Peony appears to be the princess, the queen looks past her. Rosie thinks: "*She knows. How can she know? But she does know*" (246). The queen's recognition of Rosie questions whether or not Rosie can escape her fate, Pernicia's spell. The bond between Rosie and Peony creates the possibility that fate or identity is slippery, malleable, can be handed over to someone else.

The manner in which Rosie and her friends dismantle Pernicia's spell questions many of the conventions of the traditional fairy tale. In McKinley's version, it is not the prince who wakes the princess; it is not even the princess who needs to be awoken, at

least not until Rosie passes her princesshood on to Peony with her awakening kiss. After Pernicia is defeated, Peony is still unconscious in the great hall. Rosie goes to her and:

Something—something—some nonmagic moved between them. Princess, not-princess, two young women who had traded places, who had pretended to be one young woman, who had become two other young women...Rosie leaned forward, round the globe of hands, and kissed Peony on the lips...Rosie felt an eerie, sucking sensation against her palms for a moment as she involuntarily fell forward onto Peony's breast, and a queer, fluttery, disorienting sensation in her own breast and throat, as if something were being pulled out of her and drawn into her friend (340, 343).

It is Rosie who kisses Peony, and not Rowland. Rowland is the one who finds Peony on the floor of the great hall, yet he does not know what to do. He stands by the side, as Rosie, Narl, and Katriona clasp hands on Peony's body to draw her out of her sleep. The prince becomes a passive character in the waking of "Sleeping Beauty," not possessing the skills to awaken her. In Andrew Lang's version of "Sleeping Beauty," a kiss does not occur at all, yet it is the presence of the prince in the chamber that is important. In McKinley's retelling, the presence of all of Peony's friends—Rosie, Rowland, Narl, and Katriona is important, as they work together to wake her. In Lang's version; the prince must enter the castle alone; one person alone could not have broken Pernicia's curse. As for the significance of the kiss, Rosie's ability to awaken Peony values female friendship on the same level as heterosexual love. Even as Peony is the passive sleeping princess, it is the strength of the friendship that she and Rosie have developed together that allows Rosie to wake her. By privileging female-female bonds over romantic love, *Spindle's End* shows the power that Rosie derives from friendship, and how she has made herself an independent woman that may enjoy the company of a romantic partner, yet does not need to rely on one.

Thee “something nonmagic” that passes between Rosie and Peony makes the state of being a princess something physical that can be transmitted from person to person. Although their world is saturated in magic, the royal family takes great care to keep their heritage pure of magic. Princesshood then must then necessarily be nonmagic, despite how it resists our own ideas of verisimilitude. *Spindle’s End* does not explain all of the questions that arise as Rosie physically passes princesshood on to Peony. Is it voluntary on Rosie’s part? What does it mean that Peony is unconscious when it happens? Whether or not Rosie means to give up her status as princess, she does what is necessary to save her friend. It seems that if Peony is sleeping, she does not get a choice in the matter, yet she has already fallen in love with Roland, and won the hearts of the people. Rosie is giving Peony a way to be able to live a life that was previously barred to her. Through Rosie’s kiss, Peony regains life, and the two become free to choose their destinies that are not chosen by a fairy or a king or a prince, and to become empowered females, princess or not.

The idea of princesshood as some thing tangible and changeable, separate from being born into the royal family highlights the question of fate. Rosie’s destiny of princess that has been previously so indelible that both the queen and the animals cannot miss it has been physically “sucked” out of her and into Peony. Rosie has both succumbed to her fate, in being drawn into Pernicia’s evil castle-land, and shed it when it didn’t fit her identity of horse-leech and cousin to Katriona that she has always believed in. In myth, the spinning wheel is often the tool of the Fates, yet the inhabitants of this country love their princess enough to blunt the ends of spindles to a width no smaller than a baby’s thumb, protecting the princess by un-inventing the instrument of Pernicia’s

spell. The Fates' spinning wheel is transfigured, making fate something still tangible, but no longer absolute. Rosie can be fated to prick her finger on a spindle and die, or to be born into the royal family, and still manage to sidestep or outmaneuver these outcomes. *Spindle's End* does not reject the power of fate—the story shows it to be both true, and malleable at the same time. This elasticity lends more possibilities and pluralities of meaning than the original tale.

A final consideration in *Spindle's End* is the “happily ever after ending.” Both Peony and Rosie experience this, Peony by filling in the traditional role of the princess, and Rosie by living happily ever after in the village with Narl. Amelia A. Rutledge's quotation about McKinley's three early books posits that McKinley's heroines acquire their sense of independence from interaction with men, that although they exhibit courage and independence, they could not be who they are without a man's influence. Rosie certainly does not fall into this category. She was raised by Katriona and Aunt, and although Narl both teaches her smithing and helps her defeat Pernicia, he is a taciturn teacher who encourages independent learning and he is her partner in defeating Pernicia. As opposed to *The Blue Sword*, Rosie's happy ending does not come out of nowhere. Rosie has long loved Narl, even though she thought that he loved Peony. As in *The Blue Sword*, the romance is deemphasized until the very end. Narl states his love for Rosie in a very matter of fact fashion: “Well, he said, as if commenting on the weather or the number of horses waiting to be shod and house- and shop-fittings to be cut and ploughshares to be mended, ‘it happens I'm in love with you’ (352). The description of his tone of voice positions him in every-day life, a foreshadowing of the life that Rosie and Narl will have together. Unlike many fairy tale marriages, Rosie and Narl have

known each other for all of Rosie's life, and have a healthy relationship upon which to base their affection. *Spindle's End* further diverts from tradition by ending on the promise of marriage, and not the actual marriage itself. It still subscribes to traditional fairy tale structure ending in marriage, but details, such as its de-romanticization and the absence of the marriage from the text to distance McKinley's story from the traditional mold.

Spindle's End hence presents a world where nature and magic are inextricably intertwined, and animals are not just subordinate helpers, but active doers in protecting their princess and their home. It is the merrel, and not Rosie who kills Pernicia. Animals are shown to have a physical impact upon the humans and fairies alike. The tangibility of princesshood makes magic itself more physical, and allows Rosie and Peony to choose their own destinies. The ending manages to be both traditional and subversive, adjectives that might be used to describe the fairy tale land created by McKinley as a whole. The land has a sugarplum fairy tale feel in one's mind as one reads, yet McKinley's tale creates real people out of the paper doll cut-outs of the original story.

Dragonhaven: Using Narrative Voice to Normalize the Marvelous

Dragonhaven (2007) takes place in a non-magical world similar to our own that is populated by a few mythical creatures, notably dragons who are on the endangered species list. Jake Mendoza is the fifteen-year-old protagonist who stumbles upon a baby dragon whom he raises. *Dragonhaven* addresses questions of gender, fantasy and narration. Jake becomes a hero of the sort that Le Guin proposes in *Earthsea Revisioned*, one whose “acts and choice do not involve ascendance, domination, power over others” (13). Jake’s adoption of the baby dragon disrupts the dragonslayer cliché, that dictates the knight must kill the dragon as part of a quest. Instead, Jake becomes a hero not because he seeks “ascendance or domination,” but by the force of his love and devotion to Lois, his baby dragon. *Dragonhaven* privileges the idea of nature as a place where people or dragons can find sanctuary from the rest of the busy world, and is contrasted with McKinley’s version of contemporary American politics. Jake’s candid, conversational narrative voice reflects on the process of telling the story and his awareness of writing lends another layer of verisimilitude to McKinley’s fantasy world that is quite similar to our own. Finally, *Dragonhaven* concerns itself with family structures, and the possibility of creating happiness from an unconventional arrangement.

Dragonhaven opens with a conversation between Jake and his father that references the fact that Jake’s mother died unexpectedly when he was twelve. His relationship with his father, and with other people in the park is strained as a consequence. The pain of losing his mother, and his reluctance to talk about it with his dad comprises a large amount of Jake’s teenage identity, as well as his annoyance over his dad’s slightly overbearing anxiousness. The dynamic of a missed beloved mother and

a protective, high-strung father presents the importance of the family structure and the influence of parents for Jake. Jake and his father live in Smokehill National Park, a remote preserve for dragons, who originated in Australia, but have been killed off by humans afraid of dragon attack to the point of becoming endangered. Smokehill has special wall around it that protects the dragons within, and keeps the would-be poachers out. Jake's father is the director of the Institute located in the park for studying dragons. Once Jake turns 15 is allowed to go out into the park on his first solo camping trip. On this trip, he finds a dead mother dragon, killed by a poacher, an unthinkable event in the park protected by its formerly impenetrable wall. There is one baby dragon left alive, to which Jake becomes a mother. The story follows Jake's difficulties in raising Lois, his baby dragon, that are compounded by the dead poacher's wealthy family that wants to kill all the dragons and shut down the park. Jake's tale explores friendship, tenacity, and the power of open-mindedness.

Jake narrates *Dragonhaven* as he looks back on the events of raising Lois. He is unhappy about a sentimentalized version of his story that has been published, and would like to establish his own version of raising Lois. Jake's identity as a modern teenage boy is affirmed in the conversational way in which he relates the tale, and the colloquial way in which he speaks. Since Jake is in the woods with Lois during much of the "action" of the story, when the government, influenced by the poacher's wealthy family, attempts to shut down the park, this action is conveyed second-hand. The telling of something that happened in the past lessens suspense as well, creating a tale that does not privilege conflict between people. Jake is very conscious of trying to write his story, he comments and complains about the process of telling the story to an audience. He says: "A sensitive

version [of my story] would probably be way too much like a story. A fairy tale”(2). He is aware of what kind of story he wants to tell (not a fairy tale). Jake considers his story real life, and doesn’t act like traditional men in dragon stories who go off to kill dragons and fulfill a quest. Jake also tells the reader about the physical process of writing his story: “my fingers are on the keyboard, the first finger is wiggling over the first key for the first letter of the first word (whatever that is)...and then I stop all over again, because how do I get your attention?” (3). Jake, as a character created by a writer, agonizes over the story he is trying to tell. His comments provide a narrative about the act of writing, which adds verisimilitude both to the character of Jake, and to his world, which seems so similar to our own.

Jake plays with the conventional parts of stories, switching around endings and beginnings. He says, “But this is sort of the happy ending part—or at least the cautious if a trifle shaky happy beginning—and also I didn’t think the story was going to go on this *long* and I’d like to get it over with” (268). Jake as storyteller fits into the mold of the reluctant hero. Like Tolkien’s Bilbo, he is reluctant from the beginning to the end, in this case, to do the actual telling of his story. Jake relates the story conventions to real life, where endings and beginnings may not be so clear to the people who are living them. He questions the absoluteness of the happy ending, the blanket ending that eradicates all other possibilities at the end of a traditional fairy tale. Jake further disrupts the traditional tale structure by declaring the happy ending seventy-four pages before the end of the book. The epilogue is fifty-one pages long, a whole other chapter, as opposed to the traditional few pages tacked on at the end. The story hence is continuous, without really a beginning or an end. The conflation of endings with beginnings is continued to the

very end of the book, when Martha, Katie (Martha's mother who marries Jake's father), and the dragon Gulp give birth to children who will hopefully facilitate human-dragon communication. The questioning of the fairy tale structure follows Le Guin's concept of privileging alternative aspects of heroism and the fairy tale. Jake's method of narration and disruption to story structure emphasizes the experience of raising Lois, rather than an end goal (like a dead dragon or a princess for a bride) to which everything else would be secondary. Jake's narration shows the raising of Lois to be a messy process rather than a neat progression of events.

Jake's relationship with his mother influences how he sees his role as Lois's substitute mother. When Jake stumbles upon the mother dragon during his first solo overnight in the park, he is catapulted into the role of a mother. As Jake adapts to this new lifestyle of mothering a ravenous baby dragon, he says "I was learning the mom marsupial drill" (In this world, dragons are actually marsupials, which is why the baby wants to be close to his stomach all the time, despite her blisteringly hot skin temperature) (59). Jake's role as mother questions normal ideas of gender, age, species, and even type of mammal, which may determine motherhood. *Dragonhaven* positions Jake in the role of a mother, despite his gender and age. When Jake's childhood friend who has become his wife, Martha wants to have children, he says, "It has to be a little bit strange to have a twenty-two-year-old husband who's already been through the full pulverizing parental experience" (314). Jake has not only "already been through the full...parental experience," but his role was maternal. When Lois's existence finally becomes public, Jake calls himself "Jake Mendoza, hero of the universe," ironically because he does not wish attention from the media (295). Jake thus embodies the

heroism in being a mother, the alternate heroism proposed by Le Guin that does not rely on power over others. This form of heroism, which is not focused on gaining dominance over others, can perhaps resolve the dilemma at the end of *The Blue Sword*, where it seems Harry must make the choice of being hero or mother. Jake's choice to adopt Lois makes him a hero who does not follow the traditional dragon slayer mold, rather than seeking power over the dragon, Jake tries to give Lois the care she needs to grow up. Jake becomes both a hero and a mother.

Jake humbly does not consider himself a hero; he believes that his dad is the real hero of the story. Jake's father fights to maintain the park's integrity in the face of a lawsuit to kill the dragons from the dead poacher's family. Jake's assertion of the heroism of his father shows that heroism need not be the individual heroism of a dragon slayer like St. George. The employees of Smokehill work together to save Lois and the other dragons. Jake, however, is isolated from this disruption; his life is consumed by taking care of Lois. He says in characteristic conversational understatement, "giving up your life to keep someone else alive is kind of hard" (104). Even as Jake is so immersed by caring for Lois that he has given up his normal life, he recognizes the contributions of his friends at Smokehill towards preserving Lois's life. Heroism is hence, not to be assigned to one person, no matter how Herculean their feat (such as Jake's devotion to Lois). Even as Jake cares only for Lois, he can recognize that this is possible through the protective actions of his father, Billy, the head park ranger, and the silence of his friends Martha and Eleanor.

Dragons are demystified in *Dragonhaven*. They are not the terrifying beasts of legend that sit on heaps of gold and treasure, waiting to be killed by enterprising princes,

but rather elusive and rare wild creatures to be protected. It is hard for a dragon to stay majestic and mysterious when it is pooping on Jake's stomach, and cavorting around in the yard like a puppy. Jake talks about the people his mom calls fruit loops, the people who come to the park, infatuated with the idea of dragons. The "f.l.s," as she abbreviates fruit loops, put dragons up on a far-off pedestal, while the people of Smokehill live with the reality of dragons every day. Dragons are rarely seen by the gate of the park where all the people live, yet they find dragon scales, and can smell them on the wind. Dragons can be exoticized by the f.l.s because not much is known about them and they are so hard to study, but Jake and Lois's bond becomes a catalyst for familiarization between the two species. The dragons are no longer an impenetrable mystery—Jake is learning how they live (in caves), how to communicate with them (through a painful kind of telepathy), and how best to work together to save the endangered species (actually communicating, selling shed dragon scales to raise money). Some of Jake's names for the dragons (Lois, Gulp, and Bud) also take part in the normalizing of dragons, and making them seem less scary. The ability to communicate is the important factor to understand the dragons, and the fact Jake realizes that "dragons aren't still just animals" (384). Communication between the two species allows mutual comprehension, and inhibits the sort of story that privileges power over others, or the death of a dragon. As the humans and dragons learn to communicate, they share more all-encompassing values such as the desire to survive and learn more about an "alien" species.

Dragonhaven is a *bildungsroman*, a story of growing up and changing. It tells the story of Jake's change from a fourteen and a half year old who misses his dead mother to a married twenty-one-year-old who is trying to write a dictionary to facilitate human-

dragon communication. It is also the story of Lois, the baby dragon raised away from her kind, who finds a home with Jake and ultimately reunites with the other dragons.

Eleanor, Jake's friend who is the youngest of the three children at Smokehill, emphasizes age a lot, as she tries hard to be assertive enough and keep up with Jake and Martha (her older sister). Jake discusses what is considered normal, both in the case of the Smokehill children, and for Lois. He says, "I ate at McDonald's once, and I thought their hamburgers tasted pretty exotic" (52). Eric, the zookeeper, suggests that Jake's thorough "Smokehill-ness," his unfamiliarity with "normalness" is what allows him to create the link with the dragons (294). Yet, Jake narrates in a colloquial tone, deemphasizing the magnitude and strangeness of what he is doing, and underlining his self-image as a pretty normal teen. Smokehill is so remote that Jake, Martha, and Eleanor's childhood is not what other American children would call normal even in McKinley's imagined world where dragons exist. This depart from "normalness" in real life echoes McKinley's change in the traditional dragon tale away from dragon slayers.

Jake worries a lot about raising Lois right and about Lois's development with humans, away from her kind. He asks, "What do you teach a dragon about being a dragon?" (141). He has a lot of anxiety about somehow raising Lois "wrong," as he is ignorant of dragon habits or culture. The question of nature versus nurture arises—is Lois practically human due to her upbringing? Jake emphasizes her alien appearance, the fact that she can be nothing but a dragon, but if he has not taught her how to be a dragon, then is she truly a dragon? Jake thinks about naming her Alice, after Lewis Carroll's, yet he says: "I didn't feel like encouraging any loose karma hanging around to put her through any more of the human wonderland that she absolutely had to go through" (91).

It is as if Lois has entered a kind of portal fantasy into the human world (the “human wonderland”), and Jake raises her knowing that she will need to go back, uncertain if he is giving her the skills to do so. Jake’s *Alice* reference is a reversal of perspective, where the humans live in Wonderland, alien to the dragons. The novel too is the *bildungsroman* of cross-species communication, the story of how human-dragon communication started with Jake’s adoption of Lois. Katie, Martha and Gulp (the first wild dragon Jake and Lois meet) have their babies in the presence of the other species in an attempt to continue this closeness and create understanding between humans and dragons. Although Jake has worried about raising Lois right, he really discovers a new form of communication that goes beyond just his relationship with Lois.

Dragonhaven emphasizes both the sanctity of nature, and the idea of nature as a sanctuary for the dragons. The fact that Smokehill is a national park shows an attitude that it is special, something to be protected. Simultaneously, the park itself protects the dragons. Jake describes Smokehill, articulating the dynamic between humans and nature there: “It’s a weird life living at Smokehill, where there’s all that gorgeous, amazing wonderful *empty* (I mean *human empty*) space just behind you, so to speak, but you live in like this tiny permanently besieged encampment where you have to kind of take a deep breath and bolt for it when you go from one cranny of no-tourists to the next” (7). Nature is an unusual place that the tourists are coming to visit (as well as the dragons), yet it is where Jake lives, and it is also where a myriad of animals live in the “*human empty space*.” The park is further described with words like “wild,” “strange,” and “alien” (45). Despite the very naturalness of nature, it seems “alien” to humans who don’t venture into the furthest corners of the park, far from civilization. Jake describes a physical reaction

to the immensity and the remoteness of Smokehill: “Even as wilderness parks go, Smokehill is pretty uncivilized. It’s supposed to be, but it can still kind of knock you over with it” (45). Smokehill’s function as a dragon preserve further distinguishes itself from what the tourists consider normal. Its entire reason for being is to protect the dragons, and give them a habitat. The protection of nature is an important, yet secondary side effect. Two police officers have a conversation in the gift shop, a location that already marks them as alien to the park: “But the [Park] Rangers are *crazy*. They seem to think this park and the damned dragons are some kind of sacred trust of something” (113). The people who work and live in the park think that it is exactly that, a “sacred trust,” a sanctuary for the besieged species of dragon. The police officers show an opposition between the people who care about dragons and those who do not comprehend the sacredness of the mission of Smokehill. *Dragonhaven* shows the divide between the tourists who treat nature as a novelty, and the people of Smokehill who see it as a serious asset that must be protected and that must continue to protect.

Dragonhaven is unique in McKinley’s work thus far in that it offers an overt political commentary. In living in Smokehill National Park, the government is of course important, but Jake, Martha, and Eleanor are also checked up on by school agents since they are homeschooled, and Jake’s dad must tread finely to assure continued monetary support of the park and the dragons. A controlling American government, is only concerned with Smokehill as long as Smokehill continues not to be a detriment, and is easily incensed by the wealthy family of the dead poacher to consider the dragons a threat: “party politics were being driven” to cause an invasion of Smokehill to take on the dragons (271). Jake and the others at Smokehill present a jaded, skeptical view of

politics. As government troops come to Smokehill to deal with the “dragon threat,” as the poacher’s family would have it, the “army super-jeps and things were rolling through the gate like Grond at the siege of Gondor” (270). This comparison of Jake’s real life to fiction adds verisimilitude to the story, as Jake references something the reader knows to be fiction. The skeptical view of politics that seem so possible again questions the fantasy of the book, and shows how fantasy can become more applicable to a reader’s own life.

Family structures in *Dragonhaven* are often disrupted, like in fairy tales, when the heroine might have a dead mother who can no longer protect her, or when the hero’s family becomes destitute and he must go off to seek his fortune. This similarity to fairy tales leads to a fairy tale happy-ending for the family unit. *Dragonhaven* disrupts the conventional family, and shows the love that can exist in nontraditional arrangements such as human boy-mother and dragon, and single parent families. Jake’s mother is dead, which has been a difficult situation for him, his dad, and their relationship. Eleanor and Martha’s father abruptly left Katie, their mom, when he couldn’t deal with the park and its remoteness anymore. Eric, the zookeeper realizes that he is gay. This fact is revealed as the epilogue wraps up the story, and is not central to the plot, but it presents the idea of another kind of family structure to the already diverse mix. The most prominent interruption of family structure is the death of Lois’s mother, and her adoption by Jake. One might question how Jake’s relationship with Lois is different to that of the animals that are taken in by the rescue center at the Institute, or that of Christopher Paolini’s Eragon and Saphira (another boy-dragon pairing). Jake clearly positions himself as Lois’s mother, rather than in the position of equals, discovering the world together, like

Eragon and Saphira. Lois is different from the animals at the center because she is intelligent—it's not as if Jake is mothering a raccoon or a baby bird, although he has a few of the same concerns of whether Lois will be reaccepted into the wild. Despite these ruptures to the traditional family structure, *Dragonhaven* ends with the creation of new nuclear families. Jake and Martha are happily married and have their first child, and Jake's father and Katie (Martha's mother) find later-life love and are also married and expecting a new child. The previously incomplete family structures paved the way for these nascent families to expose multiple and untraditional ways of loving.

Jake and Lois are one of the most prominent examples of a non-traditional family. Jake consistently positions himself specifically in the role of the mother, rather than a less gender-specific role. Throughout the story, Jake refers to himself as Lois's mother:

I was learning the mom marsupial drill...the maternal instinct sure is powerful...she thinks I'm her mom...I found watching her so interesting. (Proud Mom. Obsessed Mom. Silly with relief for even a few feet and a few minutes of semi-freedom Mom)...Maybe I'd adapted too far or something, headache-blasted dragon-mom Jake. Could I *remember* how to be an undragoned human anymore? (59, 68, 83, 97, 102, 204).

Jake's use of the word "mother" rather than "father" suggests a difference in the two roles. Why does Jake call himself a mom, and what exactly does he mean by it? He cannot equate "mother" with primary caregiver, because his father is his own primary caregiver. Perhaps his definition of mother comes more from the biological fact that McKinley's dragons are marsupials. Assumedly in the dragon portion of the animal kingdom, it is the mother who keeps the babies close in her pouch, just as Jake shelters Lois under his shirt, next to his stomach. Although Jake cannot give birth to offspring, dragon or otherwise, a major defining characteristic between mothers and fathers, he

raises Lois in a manner as close to that of a mother-dragon as he can approximate. Jake's self-designation as "mom" suggests that the sole difference between motherhood and fatherhood is biological, yet may still be negated in extreme circumstances like Lois's original mother's death. At the end of the book, when Martha and Jake's baby is born, Jake will again be a parent, this time a father. He has lavished so much care on Lois that it seems certain he will act similarly towards his own children.

Dragonhaven shows Jake as an unconventional hero, nature as a place alien to civilization, and offers nontraditional family structures that nonetheless lead to love and happiness. The traditional hero-who-kills-the-dragon story is completely upended in favor of a story that tells of the possibilities that can arise from cross-species communication. *Dragonhaven* presents a reverence for nature and for other species that is even more obvious when contrasted with the tourists and other characters who do not understand. Jake's plainspoken narrative voice makes the story seem more real, as does the slight critique of American politics. Although Jake departs from the conventional fairytale telling structure, the complete families at the end of the book create a happy ending for themselves. Jake's self-description of "mother" shows the slight differences between gender that can easily be crossed or negated. *Dragonhaven* shows a world-view that turns topsy-turvy, as civilization is exotic to Jake, a teen-age boy can be a mother, and dragons intrude on a world very similar to our own.

Sunshine: Doing the Impossible

Robin McKinley's *Sunshine* (2003) creates a world similar to our own that is inhabited by supernatural creatures known as Others, which include the supremely hated vampire. *Sunshine* presents a series of oppositions that interrogate the structure of the fairy tale. *Sunshine* expands from the simple binary of nature/civilization to a multitude of oppositions. In his book *The Fairytale as Art Form and Portrait of Man*, Max Lüthi discusses the prevalence of contrasts in fairytales: "Without contrasts, the fairytale would lose its distinctive character... The polarities come into being in and of themselves, according to the law of opposite word meanings. Whoever says *beautiful* says or thinks *ugly* as well; *reward* calls forth its opposite, *punishment*... the fairytale, looked at from the point of view of esthetics, always strives for balance; the fact that repetition and contrast appear together is only one especially striking, generally observable form of such equilibrium" (94-95). *Sunshine* underlines oppositions, yet the characters and events constantly react against the binaries, causing them to not hold true. *Sunshine* interrogates the role of the Other, both in the existence of the magical Others and the forest-city opposition. In an atmosphere where opposites no longer hold true, the fairy tale damsels in distress are allowed new patterns with more complex implications and the forest holds many more dangers and possibilities than a hungry wolf.

Sunshine is the daughter of a famed magic worker and a quite ordinary mother, who works at her stepfather's bakery. Their world is similar to our own, yet marked by the existence of magic. The Voodoo Wars have just occurred, a confrontation between the Others and humans that destroyed much of the human population and infrastructure and has left "bad spots," areas of magical disturbance which do not heal from the ravages

of the wars. These are consequently areas where humans do not go, and they certainly do not go outside at nighttime, when the Others lurk. The Others fall into three main categories—vampires, weres, and demons, with many variations, especially in the demon category. There is a special police force, the Special Others Force (SOF), that deals with the Others and magic. When Sunshine was younger, occasionally she would see her father's mother and learn a bit of magic, how to change one object into another, but since the Voodoo Wars, Sunshine has not seen her grandmother or tapped into her magical abilities. She has grown up at her stepfather Charlie's bakery, and is now the pastry chef there, getting up at four in the morning to make her famous cinnamon rolls. Her life is quite normal, until she decides that she is exhausted and needs an evening to herself. She heads out to the lake where her family has a cabin that they frequented before the wars. Few people go out to the lake anymore, and definitely not at night. Yet, Sunshine finds herself driving in that direction, and when she sits down on the old porch, she finds herself kidnapped by a gang of vampires. She is brought to an old house, and chained up, and as she looks around, realizes that there is another vampire who is also in chains. She learns that this is Constantine, who is involved in a feud with Bo, their captor. Before they leave, the vampires who captured Sunshine cut across her chest with a knife. She is bleeding bait, to be devoured by Constantine. Constantine, however, does not want to succumb to Bo's will, and so does not want to eat Sunshine. United by their mutual desire to escape, Con and Sunshine must collaborate, an idea antithetical in this world in which vampires are the worst Others, the greatest enemy of humankind. Sunshine turns her pocketknife into a key to unlock their chains, utilizing her latent magic skills that she has not tapped into since she was a child. The house is ill-guarded in daytime, because

vampires cannot survive in sunlight, they will combust. Sunshine creates a magical harness that protects Con from sunlight as long as he touches her, despite the universally held belief in the impossibility of this feat. Constantine manages to deliver Sunshine to her apartment, yet he tells her that Bo will realize that something extraordinary has happened, and this is not the end of the matter. Sunshine returns to her ordinary life, plagued by the vampire-inflicted wound that will not heal, the attention of SOF, which wants to know what happened to her in the two days she was missing, and the knowledge that she has collaborated with a vampire, an act which is completely unacceptable. One evening, as Sunshine is working in the bakery, she hears the giggle of one of the vampires who caught her at the lake. She runs outside and impales him with her bread knife, just as he was about to capture a girl. This act should be impossible; the proper staking of a vampire involves an oaken stake and much training. SOF becomes even more interested in Sunshine and her abilities, as she seeks to avoid them and their anti-Other prejudices. The wound on Sunshine's chest continues not to heal, and so she calls upon Constantine to heal the cut. He invents a spell to heal it, sharing blood from a mirror wound on his own chest. The healing creates a bond between the two; Con says, "We are bound now, you to me as I already was to you, for I have saved your life tonight as you saved my existence two months ago" (192). Sunshine and Constantine must face Bo, and eradicate his threat, or die themselves. Constantine helps Sunshine see in the dark, like a vampire, and they undertake the task to defeat Bo, travelling through vampire-space to reach No Town, the least rehabilitated portion of the city since the wars. They must fight their way through Bo's guard of lesser vampires; Sunshine discovers she can kill them by ripping out their hearts. When they finally reach Bo, they are almost

defeated by his sheer evil, yet Sunshine rips out his heart as well. They flee his collapsing lair, into the custody of SOF, who responds to the disturbance in No Town. Constantine disguises himself as a human, for SOF would kill him if they knew he was a vampire. After stringent questioning, Sunshine and Con are released. Sunshine believes their partnership to be over and must face the reality that she has to involve herself in the struggle against the Others, despite her wish just to be a simple baker, for SOF predicts that the vampires could prevail against humanity in the next 100 years. However, Constantine invites her to accompany him into the dark until she must get up to make cinnamon rolls, implying that their friendship need not end, and they may continue to collaborate against evil, whatever the form.

Darkness and light is one of the most absolute, Lüthi-esque contrasts in McKinley's tale. *Sunshine*'s story balances between the dark and the light; it occurs in the equilibrium between the two. The vampires inhabit the dark side of the opposition. They are creatures of the night; no sane human travels at nighttime. Sunshine embodies the light; she draws her magical strength from sunlight. Because of her affinity for sunlight, Con tells her that he does not think she can be turned into a vampire. Lüthi proposes: "polarities run through the world of the fairytale in manifold variations, and they frequently occur with respect to the same figure" (95). Sunshine herself contains the contrast between darkness and light, as Lüthi posits. He gives the example of the goose girl who is also the princess; Sunshine is a being seeped in light who also has characteristics of the dark. When Con saves her life, she gains the ability to see darkness (not just in the dark, but within shadows as well) and to travel through the alternate dimension of vampire-space.

Another absolute contrast lies between love and evil. Sunshine is forced to encounter true evil when she and Con finally appear before Bo to defeat him. Sunshine labels Bo's evilness: "Evil is a kind of oblivion, having destroyed everything on its way there" (358). She manages to defeat him by thinking of love. She doesn't mention the word, but she thinks:

I couldn't go any farther. But I still couldn't watch Con die. I *couldn't*...Think about Charlie cranking down the awning, Mom going into the office and flicking on her combox before she takes off her coat. Think about Mel in the kitchen next door. Think about Pat and Jesse sitting at their table, eating everything that Mary puts in front of them; think about Mary pouring hot coffee. Think about Mrs. Bialosky sitting at her table, and Maud sitting across from her (359-360).

Sunshine finds the courage to stand against the oblivion of evil through thinking of love, of all the people who are important to her at Charlie's cafe. Max Lüthi argues the fairytale creates polarizing contrasts, choosing the most absolutes like "the highest reward and terrible punishment...*animal child* and *king's daughter*" (95). Sunshine can't let Con die, she can't let evil prevail, so she has to do something. The polarization of evil versus love leaves no room for another option other than Sunshine trying her best to kill Bo.

A less absolute, yet still major contrast that defines Sunshine's world is the dichotomy of humans versus Others, particularly humans versus vampires. Sunshine says: "There *is no fellowship* between humans and vampires. We are fire and water, heads and tails, north and south...day and night" (224). Vampires are the ultimate antithesis to humans in a world where "anything Other [is] defined as bad" (216). Despite the seeming incompatibility of humans and Others, a fair amount of inter-marriage takes place (except with the vampires, who remain anathema to humans). The

prejudice against other kinds of Others, Weres, and demons is more governmental and institutional, less widely held by the public. Sunshine describes how people turn a blind eye to a neighbor that may be a Were, and happening to have demon blood is a fairly common experience, despite laws against miscegenation and laws that keep part-bloods from high-ranking jobs. The SOF is in secret defiance of the prejudice against Others; many of the officers have demon blood. Sunshine's world is defined by the interplay between humans and Others, rather than their supposed incompatibility.

Family and isolation is another binary in Sunshine's life. Working at Charlie's is her life and the people there are her friends and her family. When she escapes from the house by the lake, she must keep secrets from her family, isolating herself from them. She says: "I thought of lying to Charlie, to Mel, to Mom. To Mrs. Bialosky and Maud. To Aimil, even to Yolande." (404). The repeated enumeration of names shows how important these people are to Sunshine, yet she still must keep her secrets because of her world's dichotomy of human versus Other. Her relationship with her boyfriend Mel perhaps shows the binary between family and isolation most clearly: "one of the reasons Mel and I were still seeing each other after four years was because we could *not* talk about things sometimes...It was *blissful*, spending time with someone who would leave you alone. I loved him for it. And I was happy to repay in kind. It had never occurred to me that leaving someone alone could harden into a habit that could become a barrier" (141). Once again, as Lüthi describes, Sunshine embodies both isolation and family, she has to reconcile the two within herself.

What happens in the space between the polar contrasts, when absolutes no longer hold true? When Sunshine is kidnapped, the absolutes of her world cease to be quite so

absolute. Her profession of feeding humans at Charley's opposes the vampires' habit of feeding on humans. Yet in her final fight against Bo, Sunshine becomes a human who sucks vampire blood. Sunshine exhibits a fear of contamination by evil and vampires, the feeling that she must fit in the category of either dark or light. Sunshine says: "I didn't think there was a word for a human so sicko as to rescue a vampires, so he could go on being a vampire, because no one had ever done it. Before" (101). The idea of human-vampire interaction is so antithetical to Sunshine's worldview, that there isn't even a word for such a thing. After Sunshine defeats Bo, she feels contaminated by his evil: "I didn't want to be in my skin anymore. I didn't want to be me. I didn't want to *know* me...I am afraid of *me*" (354, 389). Con shows Sunshine how she can live with the potential for evil that Bo has revealed inside her, but that she doesn't have to be defined by it. It is only through a vampire that Sunshine can reconcile her dark and light sides, showing the untenable nature of the binaries that define Sunshine's world. When Con heals Sunshine's wound, and tells her that they must work together against Bo, he says: "together...we may have a chance" (163). Alone, neither could stand against Bo, yet it is the combination of old, wise vampire and easily underestimated human that can unseat Bo's seemingly limitless evil. The spaces between the binaries hence create both damaging ideas that one belongs to one pole or the other and new spaces where previously unthinkable innovations may occur.

Sunshine emphasizes the doing of the impossible. Vampires should not be able to go out in sunlight, yet somehow Sunshine creates a spell that allows Con to do so, as long as she is touching him. An encounter with vampires should end in death for a human, yet Sunshine evades them twice. Vampires should not be able to be killed with a table knife,

and Sunshine should not have known that the vampire was there. Pat, a SOF officer who frequents Charlie's, says, "I pulled the research on it that proves it can't be done, last night" (156). Sunshine describes her relationship with Con as an "antithetical bond," the partnership of two things that should be opposites (253). Sunshine says: "A human shouldn't be able to think in terms of betraying a vampire. It didn't work. Like those nonsense sentences they used to wake you up when you are supposed to be learning a foreign language. I eat the hat of my uncle. I sit upon the cat of my aunt" (219). However nonsensical it is, Sunshine and Con do have a bond that may even stretch into friendship. Sunshine asks Con if the light-web that Yolande creates for her hurts him. She is skeptical of his "no," and he goes on to describe the feeling of touching it as "a little pressure on the understood boundaries of yourself" (341). Con can feel the light-web, although it doesn't exactly hurt. He articulates what is not quite able to be said easily, a defiance of the impossible. *Sunshine* puts pressure on the understood boundaries of possibility. Her grandmother says that it is important that she is untaught in magic, for she would have learned that what she has done is impossible. Sunshine fits into Max Lüthi's category of a fairytale hero who "transgresses boundaries" and is not bound by the impossible, no matter how nonsensical it seems (141).

Sunshine is not a retelling of a fairytale, like *Spindle's End* or Robin McKinley's retellings of "Beauty and the Beast", yet it references many fairytales and fairytale conventions. Con and Sunshine discuss fairytales when they are imprisoned in the house by the lake. Con asks Sunshine to tell him her favorite story, to distract himself from the encroaching daylight. The story turns out to be "Beauty and the Beast." Sunshine laughs a little ironically at telling this story because of her own position in the presence of a

“beast.” However, there are some differences in Sunshine’s case from the original story. Con is a beast who never turns back into a human, and they work together to eradicate evil, rather than Belle aiding a helpless Beast. Sunshine concludes her telling of “Beauty and the Beast” with “a vivid—not to say lurid—scene of all-inclusive rejoicing,” markedly absent from the actual end of *Sunshine*, which does not conclude unhappily, but hardly includes lurid rejoicing (42). These departures from the traditional fairytale mark Sunshine as different from the fairytale heroines she distains, the passive Snow Whites and Cinderellas. The absence of a neat happy ending reflects the more dark, realistic tone, which wants to be far from the idealistic traditional fairytale.

The number three is a significant component of many traditional fairytales, which *Sunshine* references. Max Lüthi describes the fairytale propensity for using the number three: “The preference of the European fairytale for the number three...is well known. The listener to fairytales can rely on the fact that these numbers will keep turning up; they are one of the many constants in the fairytale...[they] mix...the familiar and the unfamiliar” (44). Sunshine has three major encounters with vampires other than Con; in her dream at the very end, her grandmother reminds her of Con three times. The first two vampire encounters allow Sunshine to gain familiarity with vampires—first she learns to escape them, then kill them, which prepares her for the third encounter where she both kills and escapes them. The triad structure reminds a reader of traditional fairytale structure. Her dream brings in Lüthi’s familiar/unfamiliar juxtaposition, as Sunshine says of her grandmother: “And for a third time she reminded me of Con, in the quality of the silence before her answer. But she sighed like a human” (400). The three times that Sunshine’s grandmother reminds her of Con question the worldview that sets humans and

vampires as total opposites. The dream mixes the familiar and the unfamiliar, but which is the familiar is in question. Sunshine has not seen her grandmother since she was ten, and she has spent a lot of time with Con, yet her grandmother is the human, and Con the vampire. The triad structure questions assumptions and offers new possibilities.

Language in *Sunshine* references fairytales and creates a structure for the story. Throughout the story after Sunshine's imprisonment, Sunshine experiences flashbacks, which are communicated to the reader through italic lines that come from her imprisonment scenes. These flashbacks remind the reader that Sunshine doesn't ever forget her experience. One example occurs when she is talking to her librarian friend Aimil about her magic handling heritage. Aimil says: "Most people say that magic handling runs out in families sooner or later" (231). Sunshine's unsaid response is a line said by Con during their imprisonment: "*Bo's lot brought me a Blaise. And not just a third cousin who can do card tricks...but Onyx Blaise's daughter*" (231). The recurring italics show the reader how much the lake episode has affected Sunshine's life. Sunshine also talks occasionally about "post-traumatic thingummy" (224). Her refusal to even say "post traumatic stress disorder" is another usage of language that directly reflects her state of mind. Finally, distinctive slang characterizes Sunshine's world. "Fo" is a commonly used abbreviation of "information", "sheer" seems to be a trendy adjective of slightly obscure meaning, and characters do not just swear by God, but by other gods of various backgrounds such as Thor and Kali. Sunshine describes her mother's opinion of magic workers: "As I got a little older I realized that people like my mother mean 'pond slime' when they say 'sorcerer.' Lunatic toxic kali pond slime" (129). Language hence

concretely reflects how Sunshine feels, characterize an unfamiliar world, and reference a mythical background for Sunshine and her world.

Sunshine thinks of herself as living in a fairy tale at various points of the story. She positions herself mentally in the role of the passive princess, throughout her adventures yet she does not let actions be restrained by her mindset. After she kills the vampire with the table knife, Mel comes to pick her up from the SOF headquarters. Sunshine imagines herself to be a princess, imprisoned by her friend Pat, a metaphorical dragon: “[Mel] was still putting out major anger vibes, even after a successful rescue of the damsel from the dragon-encircled tower. The dragon had been blue, and essentially friendly. The real problem was about the damsel...[sic]” (139). Sunshine twists around all the normal conventions. Pat is the “bad guy” dragon, yet he remains her friend. She is the damsel in distress, but she doesn’t need the saving. She continues the inversion of fairytale stereotypes. Con comes to cure her wound and discuss their fight against Bo: “Humans are at great disadvantage at night. I think I may be able to grant you certain dispensations.’ Dispensations. I liked that. Vampire as fairy godmother” (164). In her world, the vampires are the vilest, yet she imagines Con into the role of benevolent fairy godmother, giving her what she needs to go to the ball (or kill vampires, as the case might be). Sunshine’s reimagination expands fairytales to encompass diverse ways of acting, showing the strengths and the weaknesses of the fairytale. Sunshine says: “I’d always scorned the stories where the princesses hung around waiting to be rescued: Sleeping Beauty, spare me. Tell the stupid little wuss to wake up and sort out the wicked fairy herself. I found myself thinking that sleeping through it sounded pretty good after all” (331). Fairytales are not scorned in the telling of *Sunshine*, instead the themes are

expanded upon, pointing out the “stupid wusses” yet humanizing them, as Sunshine shows her fear of confronting an ancient evil vampire. Sunshine’s manipulation of the fairytale reflects her “world [that] doesn’t have...the three-wishes, go-to-the-ball-and-meet-your-prince, happily-ever-after kind of magic. We have all the mangling and malevolent kinds” (199). The changes to traditional fairytale patterns produce a darker fairytale that provides a less idealized “portrait of man” (Lüthi). The fairytale continues to be relevant, as a pattern for communicating information. The fairytale is a pattern from which to start, and the deviations from it are all the more striking for their familiar origin.

Sunshine, hence is a book which complicates binaries, explores contrasts, and what actually is possible. It uses language to produce a sort of fairy tale that references older fairy tales, and it twists normal fairytale conventions to re-form what is possible in a fairytale. It plays with expectations, both of the inhabitants of its imaginary world, and for the readers. Sunshine presents herself as an unusual heroine who manages to be an unpassive damsel in distress. In *Sunshine*, such absolutes as even darkness and light, good and evil cannot hold up as opposites. By defying the impossible, Sunshine evades boundaries and makes readers question their own assumptions.

Conclusion: The Intersections of Gender, Fantasy, and Nature

McKinley uses the fantasy genre as a space where non-traditional events might occur. She capitalizes on that part of the fantasy genre that Tolkien and Le Guin defend against, its penchant for the marvelous, and the possibilities that arise when the rules of our own world do not have to hold true. In McKinley's reinvented worlds, the fairytale pattern doesn't have to hold true. *The Blue Sword* ends in happily-ever-after marriage, but Harry doesn't get there by being a passive princess. Harry's independent choices to defend what she loves provide a different example of behavior to readers. *Spindle's End* is a fairytale retold directly. Rosie and Peony have their own agency and do not easily submit to the evil fairy's spell. New possibilities arise every time one of McKinley's characters deviates from the original "Sleeping Beauty" story. *Dragonhaven* and *Sunshine* too contain this property of innovation and new ways of seeing the world.

In her book *Robin McKinley: Girl Reader, Woman Writer*, Evelyn M. Perry analyzes McKinley's work through extensive biographical comparison. She also talks about McKinley's use of fairytale structure: "Using the classic plot lines of fantasy and fairy tale, McKinley contemporizes both genres through 'the McKinley girls'" (xvi). Perry illustrates how "the McKinley girls" act independently, creating a fairytale that will be acceptable to modern audiences who realize that girls can do more than sit in a tower and languish. However, I would like to propose that McKinley goes farther than contemporizing the fairytale. In changing the fairytale patterns of happily-ever-after and marriage, she creates examples of ways to live that evade patriarchal dependence. The very term "the McKinley girls" suggests that McKinley's heroines are interchangeable, and frankly, the term "girls" seems diminutive, making them seem more similar to

children then independent women. Not all of McKinley's major characters are girls (notably Jake in *Dragonhaven*, Robin in *The Outlaws of Sherwood*, and Ebon in *Pegasus*). Sunshine is a vastly different character than Harry, even if they are both women who aren't afraid to take chances and act independently. By changing the fairytale structure, McKinley offers examples that may change how humanity's image of itself. Lüthi's idea of the fairytale as the nature of man means that the fairytale is mutable, and to be changed, rather than contemporized, shifted to fit with the morals of a time period.

McKinley's work is often put into the categories of children's or young adult literature by critics and librarians. They are categories often dismissed as insignificant by serious critics, yet in his book *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, Michael Cart quotes authors who believe young adult literature is full of possibility. Anna Lawrence-Pietroni says: "Young adult fiction defies easy categorization and by its nature proposes a more liberating view of genre as process rather than as circumspection and definition" (Cart 60). Like Lawrence-Pietroni's definition of young adult literature, McKinley tries to make gender and fantasy into entities that are less easily defined. Jake is both a teenage boy and a mother, and he lives in a magic-less world very similar to our own. Can McKinley's work be solidly categorized as young adult or children's literature, when *Deerskin* deals with rape and *Sunshine* includes a few casual references to sex?

Francesca Lia Block proposes the creation of a category that doesn't exclude:

"Society is beginning to understand that childhood and adulthood are not really as separate as people think they are...[sic] Childhood is filled with darkness, the need for love, and the search for acceptance. Why can't we create a category which all the barriers will cross? This is the intention in bookstores and libraries: books that appeal to young and old, gay and straight, open-minded and representative of different racial backgrounds.

Maybe we can begin here to use literature as a way to connect rather than divide” (Cart 60).

McKinley’s refusal to stick to the conventions of categories such as fairytales, mothers, or fantasy demonstrates her participation in a literature that fosters connection rather than division. At the end of *The Blue Sword*, Harry chooses to set up diplomatic relations with the Homelanders, although she could have easily lived happily in the Hills, safe from their threat in the remote Hill kingdom. Even McKinley’s characters choose to reach out to others of different backgrounds rather than stick to what is safe and comfortable.

McKinley’s emphasis on gender roles both questions what gender truly entails, and provides characters who do not make their choices because of preconceived notions of how a woman or a man should act. In a 1997 video interview with Tim Podell, McKinley said that she writes a lot of female characters because there aren’t many in the fantasy genre, yet she is not exclusively interested in writing about women. Her female characters are certainly not damsels in distress, as many traditional fairytale heroines are, even the ones who display a little more gumption, such as the heroine of “The Goose Girl,” who is reliant on the king to give her back her position of princess, or the heroine of “East of the Sun, West of the Moon,” who must wash a dirty shirt to win her prince. Harry, Rosie and Sunshine may depend on their male friends for help, but they take the lead in solving their own problems, and are not forced into domestic roles. *Dragonhaven* questions the idea that only a woman may be a mother, and shows the love that a teenage boy can hold for a baby dragon. Jake’s down-to-earth narrative voice normalizes his unconventional actions, and presents the idea of a new standard of normalcy.

Nature works similarly to fantasy in McKinley’s works. It is a space not bound by traditional rules, where characters can act innovatively to solve their problems. Sunshine

is captured by vampires at the lake, but it is in this natural space that she makes magic perform unheard-of feats. Rosie's affinity for animals and nature is what has allowed her to evade Pernicia's curse for so long, and it is these, her natural friendships that allow her to prevail against evil. Harry must be taken out of the society of her birth to find the place that she belongs, and Jake finds refuge and groundbreaking knowledge of dragon intelligence in the wilderness. McKinley's characterization of the natural world gives her characters extra aid when they are about to fail, and it gives them a space in which to discover their identities that run counter to the roles that traditional fairytales would allow them.

Le Guin discusses the green world of fantasy—the imaginative natural space untrammelled by humans that is touched by nostalgia. She posits that fantasy authors use nature to imagine a new way of being: “In reinventing the world of intense, unreproducible, local knowledge, seemingly by a denial or evasion of current reality, fantasists are perhaps trying to assert and explore a larger reality than we now allow ourselves” (*Cheek* 41). Like McKinley in *Sunshine*, Le Guin is trying to redefine what is possible. McKinley uses nature as an experimental environment, where the weight of tradition need not press so heavily, and new ideas can be investigated. She is not necessarily lamenting a lost state, but rather proposing what can be done with the perceptions and worldviews we live with today. Veronica Schanoes quotes Rosemary Jackson who believes fantasy is “a means of expressing ‘that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems’” (James and Mendlesohn 246). McKinley combines nature and fantasy together to investigate that which lies outside dominant value systems, to create new ways of thinking.

Having said that nature acts as a subversive place in fantasy literature, Alexander C. Irvine argues much the opposite in his essay on urban fantasy. He describes the city's vibrant potential for change, while nature represents an ominous threat. He says, "much contemporary urban fantasy...rebels against the natural landscape" (James and Mendlesohn 211). Irvine's essay shows the impossibility of a generalization, when in pursuit of new ways of thinking. Nature is not the only place in which to interrogate dominant value systems, although it seems to be where McKinley does it best. Although city and countryside seem to be in polar opposition, they may in fact represent the same sort of questioning of *status quo*.

Through nature and fantasy, McKinley proposes new ways of conceiving gender roles that are counter to the traditional opportunities of fairytales that include the passive princess and the hero prince. Although her work is often classified as children's or young adult literature, this should not be a diminishing characteristic, as McKinley, as Block describes seems to be working towards literature that crosses boundaries and is not meant for only one target audience. McKinley's works create connections, and offer new ideas, rather than restrict thinking into the traditional fairytale mold. McKinley builds off of the fairytale tradition to offer new possibilities that seem even more credible for their traditional grounding. McKinley shows how the fairytale form remains relevant in the world today as an evolving mold that can widen perceptions of what is possible.

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