

Representations of Violent Women in Popular Culture and World Politics:

The Mothers, Monsters, Whores, and Penitents of Young Adult Fantasy

by

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I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

As young adult fiction has surged in popularity over the past decade, a popular new sub-genre has emerged. These novels feature high-fantasy stories with young female heroines who are fighters, assassins, spies, and rebel leaders. In this paper, I argue that representations of women's violence in these stories have implications for global politics. Although these young-adult heroines are intended to serve as examples of female empowerment, the characters reflect dominant social, academic, and political narratives that depict violent women as either *mothers*, *monsters*, or *whores* (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). Into this conversation I introduce a fourth narrative, that of *penitent*, which portrays women's political violence as an unnatural, transitional state to be ultimately rejected. This paper explores how three bestselling young adult fantasy series engage with these narratives and argues that—despite their feminist intentions—these novels reflect, reinforce and strengthen gender subordinating narratives that undermine the agency of violent women.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Al Qaeda fanatics plumbed to sickening new depths yesterday when they turned two women with Down's syndrome into human bombs to kill 99 people in Baghdad. The unwitting pawns were apparently fooled into wearing explosive vests which were then detonated remotely by mobile phones as the women mingled with crowds. The two blasts caused carnage at two busy markets in the Iraqi capital's deadliest atrocity since last spring.

-*The Daily Mail* (2008)

It's a child's scream, a young girl's scream, there's no one in the arena capable of making that sound except Rue...The boy from District 1 dies before he can pull out the spear. My arrow drives deeply into the center of his neck. He falls to his knees and halves the brief remainder of his life by yanking out the arrow and drowning in his own blood...

-Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (2008, 233)

After the February 2008 bombings in Baghdad, Western media immediately seized on the fact that the bombers were women. Even though women have participated in suicide attacks for decades, press coverage treated the incident as an aberrant, shocking event. After all, no sane woman would rationally choose to blow herself up, and speculation ran wild about the women's motivation. News outlets reported that the women must have been "mentally retarded" or that the men of al-Qaeda forced them to carry out the bombings (*Associated Press* 2008; *Daily Mail* 2008). Another claimed one of the attackers was known as "the [local] crazy lady" (*The Star* 2008), although such reports were later debunked as pure fiction (O'Rourke 2008).

A month later, Suzanne Collins published *The Hunger Games*, a novel about a 16-year-old girl who brutally massacred four other children in an act of political violence. However, the public's reception to this story was radically different. News coverage labeled Katniss "cold, calculating and still likable" (Whalen Turner 2008). She became a household name, with some lauding her as a new feminist icon. Since the release of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss has become

a role model for future generations of young teen girls, and she is often referred to as a positive example of a girl who took control of her own destiny (Chen 2012; Dean 2014; Moore 2013).

At first, these stories appear quite different. However, both draw from a set of pervasive social, political, and academic narratives about women who engage in political violence, illuminating problematic gender stereotypes (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). Because conventional thinking assumes that women are non-violent, observers create stories and narratives to explain why female terrorists violate conventional gender norms (Bloom 2011; Ness 2005; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). If (as the stereotypes insist) women are non-violent, then the female suicide bombers in Iraq must have been *crazy, unwitting, or forced* to carry out the attack by men. It could never have been their choice. If women are not *supposed* to be violent, then Katniss must have killed the boy impulsively, reacting based on maternal instinct after the death of Rue. Neither narrative accepts that violent women can -- and are -- individuals who exercise deliberate, calculated political agency through violent actions. In these problematic narratives, the true motivations of these women are obscured. The Iraqi bombers are reduced to madwomen, and Katniss becomes a rage-filled vengeful mother. How can we better understand the motivations of women who engage in political violence, and our own tendency to ascribe gendered storylines onto narratives that deny women agency in their violence? The intersection of popular culture and global politics may yield an answer.

The popular culture - world politics nexus

Since *Harry Potter* exploded onto the literary scene in 1997, young adult (YA) fantasy novels have emerged as one of the most popular and rapidly expanding literary genres. Despite

the youth label, these novels are read widely by teens and adults alike (Brown 2011, Howlett 2015; Lewit 2012, Milliot 2015; Withers and Ross 2011), and their impact spans far beyond the literary domain (Lopour 2017; Nexon and Neumann 2006). Popular franchises such as *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *Twilight* have evolved into mainstream cultural juggernauts, with spinoff films, music, amusement parks, clothing lines, and toys distributed across global markets. As of 2016, The *Harry Potter* franchise alone was worth US \$25 billion (Meyer 2016). As a result, some international relations scholars have turned their attention to the impact of this genre on global politics. However, many IR studies of YA literature have focused primarily on themes within an individual work or series (see Nexon and Neumann 2006; Silver 2010; Woloshyn, Taber and Lane 2013).

This thesis explores the role that YA high-fantasy novels play in what Grayson, Davies, and Philpott (2009) describe as the “popular culture - world politics continuum.” I explore trends across a large body of work, similar to Kitchen’s study on military romance novels (2016), with a focus on a specific and extremely popular sub-genre: young adult high-fantasy novels. Many of these novels feature female protagonists who are fighters, soldiers, assassins, or rebels that seek to challenge patriarchal systems, overthrow regimes, and overcome gender subordinating barriers. This type of storyline and novel has experienced a resurgence in popularity in recent years (see Lewit 2012; Lipsyte 2011; Marks 2013; Ross 2014). Of note, this thesis builds on a foundation of an initial, unpublished paper by Lopour (2017) that explores the significance of this sub-genre as a site of global politics. Building on the arguments in Lopour 2017, I argue that YA fantasy novels are a useful lens by which we can explore political, academic, and social narratives that reinforce gender biases about women who engage in political violence and conflict. Drawing from work that Laura Sjoberg, Caron Gentry (2007) and

Mia Bloom (2011) have conducted on violent women, I argue that these popular young adult fantasy stories reflect and strengthen existing narratives that deny violent women agency in their violence, obscure women's motivations for engaging in political violence, and ensure that dominant narratives about women as passive, peaceful and non-violent remain intact.

Thesis roadmap

Mia Bloom, in her 2011 book *Bombshell*, notes that the overarching narrative about violent women is that a woman could not possibly choose to engage in terrorism of her own free will. Sjoberg and Gentry (2007, 2008, 2015) propose three narratives that play dominant roles in academic, political, and social discourse about politically violent women: these women are not real women, but are instead *mothers*, *monsters*, or *whores*. In these narratives, real women are supposed to be peaceful and passive. Consequently, the narratives insist violent women must be deviants – victims of “faulty biology” or coerced into violence by men – and emphasize that politically violent women are not responsible for their acts and bear no agency in committing them (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007).

In the following chapters, I show how these narratives play out in YA high-fantasy novels, using three popular YA franchises as case studies. These series span a total of 12 books and include Sarah J. Maas' six-book *Throne of Glass* series, Kristin Cashore's three-book *Graceling* franchise, and Sabaa Tahir's three-book *An Ember in the Ashes* series. I also introduce a fourth narrative about women who engage in political violence, the *violent-woman-as-penitent*. In the *penitent* narrative, violent behavior is depicted as an unacceptable and unsustainable state of being, something that occurs during a transitional state but is eventually

rejected and left in the past.

In Chapter 2, I explore how YA high-fantasy literature is uniquely positioned as an influential site of global politics, particularly when it comes to unpacking narratives about war, conflict, and women who engage in proscribed violence. In Chapter 3, I dig deeper into these academic, social, political, and cultural narratives about politically violent women, including a discussion of Sjoberg and Gentry's narratives of *mother*, *monster*, and *whore*. In Chapter 4, I explain how all three case studies have main characters that draw heavily on the “*nurturing mother*” and/or “*vengeful mother*” narratives, which portray violence as a byproduct of wayward maternal instinct and ensures readers are not asked to hold the violent heroines responsible for their actions.

In Chapter 5, I show how some heroines are described as *monsters* -- women who are violent because of nature (not nurture). Many of these female characters are born with a magical ability or superpower that genetically predisposes them to violence, and thus they have no agency in their actions and are not held responsible for the death and violence they cause. In Chapter 6, I note that the *whore* narrative is surprisingly dominant throughout all three series. Often this occurs through backstory: the *whore* narrative forces the reader to accept that these female characters did not choose to be violent and were instead forced to carry out politically-motivated violence by the men in their lives. One trope in all three books involves a man (or group of men), typically father figures, who deliberately molded the heroines into skilled fighters and killers, and then demanded that these women carry out violence in his/their name.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I introduce a new narrative, that of the *penitent* violent woman. In some narratives, the *penitent* woman renounces violence and assumes a traditional gender role, such as nurturing mother, wife, or comforter. In other *penitent* narratives, the violent woman is only able to leave violence behind through a redemptive sacrifice, and in doing so reclaims her abandoned womanhood. In Chapter 8, I conclude by arguing that these novels are not, as they first appear, stories of female empowerment, but are instead deeply subversive stories that naturalize, entrench, and solidify existing social, cultural, and political narratives that deprive women of responsibility and agency for their violent acts (Lopour 2017). Such narratives are problematic, as popular culture serves as a powerful site where representations of power and identity are constituted, produced and replicated (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009), often in a way that is more powerful and influential than official discourse (Nexon and Neumann 2006). To caveat, my research revealed no indication that the use of the *mother*, *monster*, or *whore* narratives was deliberate on the part of these specific authors. More likely, the complete social, political, and cultural domination of these narratives led the authors to unconsciously employ them and adapt them for their own characters and storylines.

Definitions and case selection

The genres of “fantasy literature” and “young adult literature” are ambiguous and difficult to define, even by those in the publishing industry (MacRae 1998, Williams 2014). The fantasy genre itself is extremely broad, with countless sub-genres, including high fantasy (e.g. *Lord of the Rings*), low-fantasy (e.g. *Harry Potter*), paranormal fantasy (e.g. *Twilight*), dystopian fantasy (e.g. *The Hunger Games*), and others (MacRae 1998). I define high-fantasy literature in this thesis as novels set in an imaginary world, often one in which magic plays a large role. High

fantasy differs from low fantasy, in that high fantasy is set in a world other than our own (a “secondary world”), whereas low fantasy refers to novels where magic occurs in our own real world (MacRae 1998, 9).

The “Young Adult” category is equally ambiguous but may be best described as a bridge between child and adult literature, written for readers between the ages of 12-18 years (Doll 2012; Williams 2014). Nonetheless, it appeals to a wide demographic, with extensive adult readership. In 2015, Nielson reported that adult readers purchased over 80 percent of young adult books (Gilmore 2015). The novels often involve heavy-handed political and social themes, set within a backdrop of wars, rebellions, or climate/environmental catastrophe. Based on the extensive readership -- and consistently high book sales -- young adult novels are clearly culturally, socially, and politically significant, and their themes of conflict appear to resonate with teen and adult audiences alike. As Melissa Ames (2013) argues in her essay, *‘Apolitical’ Adolescents and Dystopian Literature*, readers gravitate to these novels because they are specifically interested in interacting with the themes of conflict and terrorism, particularly in the current post-9/11 socio-political climate.

To be included in this thesis, these novels needed to meet several key criteria. First, they had to feature female protagonists and meet the previous definitions of “high fantasy” and “young adult.” Second, they must have wide readership, current popular appeal, and broad social/cultural significance. To establish broad appeal and cultural significance, the novels had to: (a) belong to a *New York Times* bestselling series; (b) been selected as finalists in an annual

Goodreads Choice Awards¹; (c) been published within the last decade; and (d) been optioned by major studios for film or television production, suggesting potential for broader distribution and impact beyond the literary domain (see Andreevah 2016; Lamoureux 2014; McNary 2013). Finally, all novels discussed in this thesis were written by women who indicated that they were deliberately writing within a “feminist” context and highlighting themes they perceived as feminist, such as strength, empowerment, self-determination, and surmounting social, cultural, and political barriers (see Breznican 2016; Cashore 2015; Gonzalez 2016; Staggs 2015; Thompson 2017; White 2016). And finally, the novels had to include female protagonists who engage in political violence.

In this thesis, I define *political violence* as violence motivated by political ideology, or as violence that achieves political goals. However, I note the limitations and constraints of this definition, particularly when applied in contexts that include issues such as gender, motivation, and agency. As noted by Moser and Clark, “political violence is only one category within the broad spectrum of violence with a diversity of context-specific classifications and semantic distinctions” (Moser and Clark 2001). Furthermore, definitions of political violence are problematic when applied to studies about violent women, as “most theories of individual violence either explicitly or implicitly exclude women,” and are predicated on “masculinized understandings of knowledge, values, and actions,” which makes them “inadequate to explain both men’s and women’s violence” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 175-176).

¹ Goodreads Choice Awards are granted based on reader votes and nominations. One novel included in this study, *Graceling* by Kristin Cashore, was published before the first Goodreads Choice Awards competition, which started in 2009. *Graceling*, however, ranked in the top ten of the “Goodreads Best Books of 2008” list, a precursor to the Choice Awards that was similarly based on popular votes (Goodreads 2008).

Case One: *Throne of Glass* series

In the first case, Sarah J. Maas' *Throne of Glass* series, heroine Celaena Sardothien (later revealed to be Aelin, a missing princess) is a ruthless and bloodthirsty assassin who murders countless people before the novel even begins. Maas, through Celaena's backstory, repeatedly emphasizes that Celaena had no agency in her violence. After Celaena's parents were murdered, she is raised by a professional freelance assassin and, at eight years old, forced to train as his protege. Then she is arrested, imprisoned/enslaved in a work camp, and released only after she agrees to become the evil king's assassin. After the brutal murder of her best friend, she reclaims her birthright as princess and becomes the leader of a rebellion to overthrow the king. The series includes a secondary heroine, Lysandra, who is both literally *monster* (shapeshifter) and *whore* (courtesan), and she emerges as an equally deadly killer who supports Celaena/Aelin in her rebellion. *The Throne of Glass* series is one of the most popular in this genre. Almost every novel in the series has been a *New York Times* bestseller, and the series is currently in development as a TV show on Hulu (Andreevah 2016; Maughan 2015). The series also has broad international appeal, with translations in over 35 languages (Maas 2018). The fourth book in the series won the Goodreads Choice Award in 2015, and the other novels were finalists in 2017, 2016, 2014, 2013, and 2012 (Goodreads 2017; 2016; 2015; 2014; 2013; 2012).

Case Two: *Graceling* series

In the second case, Kristin Cashore's *Graceling* franchise, Katsa's violence is part of her *nature*, as she is born "Graced" with an innate magical ability that automatically makes her the realm's most effective killer (Cashore 2008a). However, like Celaena, Katsa's backstory

absolves her of any responsibility or agency in her violence. Her uncle, the evil king, forced her to hone her fighting skills as a child so that he could use the teenage heroine as an executioner and political enforcer. Cashore emphasizes to readers that this was not Katsa's fault: "His commands included specifics: blood and pain, for this or that length of time. There was no way around what he wanted" (Cashore 2008a, 29). Both Katsa's magical ability and her upbringing are deliberate plot points designed to ensure that the reader understands that Katsa is absolutely blameless for the murder and torture she commits. She was *born* a violent killer, but also *made* into one by a man. In the story, Katsa also leads a rebel group that seeks to overthrow several corrupt kings in the region. After traveling across the continent, she gains allies who help her overthrow a neighboring genocidal and manipulative king, who Katsa then kills personally.

The main character in the *Graceling* prequel, named "Fire," is literally born a "monster" (the book describes "monsters" as supernatural beings who are as beautiful and captivating as they are dangerous). In this novel, Fire uses her violence to help a just and worthy king win a civil war started by a neighboring kingdom. Like Katsa and Celaena, Fire also has a dominant male figure who tries to mold and push her into committing acts of political violence. Fire is raised by her charismatic and sadistic father, the former king's chief advisor, and he teaches her that it is acceptable to maim and kill for her own political ambitions. While this could serve as a counterfactual example of a YA heroine (one that exercises agency in her violence), Cashore's plot devices ensure Fire need not take responsibility for more than one death. Fire despises her father's teachings, and she ultimately lures him to his death, so she can escape his influence. Drawing on the *whore* narrative, Fire's monster nature also makes her irresistible to men, and Cashore makes it clear that Fire is forced to repeatedly use violence with almost every man she

meets to prevent herself from being sexually violated (Cashore 2009).

Cashore's *Graceling* series is extremely popular with audiences, with more than 1.5 million books sold and translations in over 33 languages (Dyer 2017, *New York Times* 2012; *New York Times* 2009). It has won numerous awards, including: being named an ALA Best Book for Young Adults; *Publishers Weekly* Best Books of the Year; Booklist Editors' Choices; a Goodreads Choice Award finalist in 2012; and a Goodreads Best Book of 2008, among others (CBC 2016; Goodreads 2012; 2008). In 2013, the series was optioned for a film franchise that is currently in development (IMDB 2017; McNary 2013).

Case Three: *Ember in the Ashes* series

In the third case, Sabaa Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes* series, Tahir uses the *mother* and *whore* narratives to exculpate Helene -- one of the two female heroines -- from responsibility for her violence. Helene's backstory is similar to that of Katsa and Celaena. In a fantasy setting reminiscent of ancient Rome, Helene is the only female cadet at an academy that trains the empire's most brutal and elite killers. In order to survive, she becomes a skilled fighter and rises to the top of her class (Tahir 2016). She also falls in love with Elias, a fellow fighter at the academy. Tahir gives Helene a history that ensures the readers know she is not a killer by choice. She was forced into the academy by the empire's religious order and would have been killed if she refused. When rebellion breaks out in the empire, Helene is sympathetic to the rebels -- as her love interest has joined their cause -- but is instead forced by duty and familial ties to kill for the brutal empire instead.

Other female characters in the *Ember* series serve as foils to Helene, further highlighting persistent and dominant narratives about women and violence. Laia, the primary protagonist, largely conforms to stereotypical, essentialist gender narratives, including one that almost perfectly matches the narrative of the *Beautiful Soul*, or the innocent woman who male warriors must defend (Elshtain 1982; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). A third female character, the Commandant -- who also happens to be Elias's mother -- runs the brutal military academy and serves as a gross caricature of the ultimate female *monster*, one who is so insane that she kills without remorse and has no control (or agency) over her actions.

Tahir's *Ember in the Ashes* series is one of the most popular in the YA genre, called by some the "next Game of Thrones" (Pitney 2015). Even before publication, the series was optioned by Paramount in a seven-figure film deal (Lamoureux 2014). The *Ember* series is a *New York Times*, *USA Today* and international bestselling series and has been released in more than 35 countries (*New York Times* 2015; Tahir 2018b). The first two books in the series were finalists in the 2015 and 2016 Goodreads Choice Awards, respectively (Goodreads 2015; Goodreads 2016).

Problematic narratives about women's violence

The narratives about violent women in these novels reveal the paradox inherent in this genre.² On one hand, readers are invited to cheer for heroines who seek to break down gender

² The conclusions drawn in this thesis should not be perceived as entirely representative of the entire YA fantasy genre, as it speaks only to books within this narrow sub-genre. The novels discussed in this study reflect extremely western-centric characters and societies, as well as a tendency to prioritize heteronormative relationships, a bias that reflects wider criticisms of the genre itself (Lee 2014; Rubinstein-Avila 2007; Welsh 2011).

barriers and overthrow patriarchal rulers and systems (Lopour 2017). Readers are invited to view these women as examples of strong and empowered women, and fan responses on popular blogs and media sites suggest audiences enthusiastically accept this invitation (e.g. Parkin 2012; Simpson 2016). Maas in interviews commented that she wrote Celaena to be the “heroine who got to do all the ‘fun’ things that boys usually get to do: kick butt, kill monsters, [and] save the world” (Writers & Artists 2018). On the other hand, plot devices and underlying narratives ensure that these heroines are denied full agency in their violence. The narratives tell the reader that these female protagonists did not choose to become violent, and they did not choose to obtain the skills and experience that allow them to conduct their rebellions and insurgencies. The authors contrived plot devices, male characters, backstories, and relied on powerful social and political narratives that thrust these female characters into a situation where they were forced to respond with political violence, absolving the heroines of any responsibility for their violent nature and behavior. This allows the readers to engage with the heroines, root for their success, and sympathize with their struggles without having to grapple with the implications of supporting a female character who essentially commits acts of murder, torture, or terrorism (Lopour 2017). With the use of narratives such as these, “neither the storyteller nor story consumer must hold women accountable” for their violent actions (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 13).

Chapter 2. From Harry to Katniss: YA fantasy literature as a site of global politics

Over the past ten years, an increasing number of scholars have begun exploring the relationship between popular culture and international relations. Popular culture serves multiple functions as a lens for IR: it illuminates, shapes, reinforces, and challenges identities and narratives in world politics (Duncombe and Bleiker 2015; Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009; Lopour 2017; Nexon and Neumann 2006; Ruane and James 2008). In their groundbreaking book, *Harry Potter and International Relations*, Nexon and Neumann argue that popular culture artifacts serve as a form of *data*, or “evidence about dominant norms, ideas, identities, or beliefs in a particular state, society, or region...[that] may reflect general cultural themes and assumptions better than elite discourse” (Nexon and Neumann 2006, 13). If narratives are a “shortcut” that help people understand global politics, popular culture serves a type of “shortcut to the shortcut,” helping audiences understand and traverse difficult subjects and global events while remaining safe from a distant vantage point.

Popular culture, however, does not merely reflect social norms and narratives -- it can impact, change, or reinforce the very norms it displays. Nexon and Neumann describe this as popular culture’s *naturalizing* effect on international politics, in that its treatment of certain political representations can “make a particular way of looking at the world appear to be part of the natural order... and hence difficult to argue against” (Nexon and Neumann 2006, 19). Grayson, Davies, and Philpott call this phenomenon the “popular culture - world politics continuum,” in which each is implicated in the practices and understandings of the other and serve a key role in shaping and challenging politics and political subjectivity (Grayson, Davies,

and Philpott 2009, 158). In addition, popular culture serves as a proxy battlefield for international relations and global politics debates (Ruane and James 2008; Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009), and popular culture's broad reach across multicultural audiences draws in individuals who may not even be aware that they are participating in a global politics discourse. Indeed, there are dozens of pedagogical studies about using popular films and books to teach students and help them form views about political science and international relations, ranging from topics such as zombies to the Hollywood blockbuster *Independence Day* (e.g. Blanton 2013; Drezner 2014; Webber 2005). As suggested by Grayson Davies and Philpott (2009) and Weldes and Rowley (2015), I avoid simplifying the popular culture - world politics relationship to one of causality (i.e. searching for if/what/why popular culture 'does' something 'to' world politics). I instead focus on the "how" of the relationship, exploring how popular culture and world politics intertwine and interact in a complex and multifaceted way (Weldes and Rowley 2015).

Over the past 15 years, both fantasy literature and YA literature have attracted increasing attention as sources of study for scholars interested in the popular culture - world politics continuum. Previous studies have examined other fantasy sub-genres, including adult fantasy, low-fantasy, dystopian fantasy, and paranormal fantasy. It would be remiss not to mention the decades of scholarship on the single most influential English-language fantasy book: *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR). In Ernest Mathijs' *The Lord of the Rings: Popular Culture in Global Context*, Mathijs points out that the popular book/movie franchise has been "used to support opinions on practically every cultural discourse from racism to vintage cuisine" (Mathijs 2006). Other LOTR studies examine the interplay between the novel/films and various traditions of IR and feminist theory (Ruane and James 2008) as well as its geopolitical approach to race and

representation (Kim 2004; Rearick 2004), among others. For YA fantasy, by far, the broadest attention has been on what the *New York Times* called the “publishing holy trinity” of YA fiction: *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Twilight* (Dominus 2011). Scholarship on *Harry Potter* has covered most major IR fields, including the novel’s nexus with: conflict, globalization, world commerce, sports, human rights, terrorism, war, and pedagogy (Barratt 2012; Nexon and Neumann 2006). Other scholars’ contributions include *Harry Potter*’s impact on political activism (Jenkins 2015; Gierzynski, Eddy, and Threlkeld 2013), political justice (Chevalier 2005), and religious politics (Gemmill and Nexon 2006; Neumann 2006).

With *Twilight*, scholars tend to focus on gender politics (Dietz 2011; Jarvis 2014; Morey 2012; Silver 2010; Summers 2010; Taylor 2012; Taylor 2014), with many arguing that the novels’ themes are decidedly anti-feminist. Torkelson emphasizes the connection between the novel’s sexual violence and broad gender power imbalances, noting the pairing of the “intellectually superior male vampire” with a “weak, vulnerable human female...denies Bella the power afforded to the saga’s central male characters” (Torkelson 2011, 209). Few studies, however, examine *Twilight* from a global politics perspective, although Kindinger (2011) and Erzen (2011) argue that that the novel has global significance in the way that it addresses regionalism, globalization, and commerce.

The *Hunger Games* franchise has attracted equal attention for its themes involving gender politics (Lear 2015; Kirby 2015; Taber, Woloshyn and Lane 2013). Lear argues that *The Hunger Games*, like other dystopian novels, is a “heteronormative wasteland that perpetuate[s] the reproduction and performance of traditional gender roles” (Lear 2015, 4). Kirby, on the other hand, argues that Katniss is a “progressive heroine,” and positions his analysis as the “feminist

geopolitics” counterpart of studies that recently re-examined the geopolitics of the Hollywood action hero (Kirby 2015). Numerous other studies attempt to map *The Hunger Games* onto the popular culture - world politics continuum. Clemente (2012) argues that *The Hunger Games* is an “activist series” that warns about the destructive economics and politics in the current world. Pavlovik (2012) discusses the novels’ relationship with fascist ideology, and MacNeil (2015) adds a new dimension by examining the series’ impact on international human rights and the Universal Periodic Review. Several studies explore *The Hunger Games* from a pedagogical perspective, examining how it shapes adolescents’ views of violence, war and gender, and they examine how they can be used to teach these themes to teens (Ames 2013; Dreyer 2015; Taber, Woloshyn, and Lane 2013; Wessells and McEvoy-Levy 2017).

By their very subject matter, the YA high-fantasy novels discussed in this thesis exist at the crossroads of debates on politics, international relations, security, gender, and popular culture. Like *the Hunger Games*, the YA high-fantasy novels discussed in this thesis draw heavily from themes of global conflict and war. A common YA high-fantasy story arc involves female protagonists who lead or play critical roles in rebellions that seek to depose autocratic or tyrannical governments (e.g. Cashore 2008a; Maas 2012, Tahir 2015). In doing so, YA high-fantasy authors often draw from actual world events. Maas and Tahir both noted that they drew from research on historical wars, conquests, and current conflicts when writing their novels (Genn 2014; Staggs 2015). In academic studies, war “remains the single most theorized and researched activity in Politics, International Relations and cognate disciplines” (Parashar 2015, 99). Studies of war, have themselves become meta-battlefields for debates on gender and politics:

Wars have become more sophisticated, more theatrical... [and] a deeply gendered activity in how it is imagined, strategized, performed and also in its impact, representation and storytelling. Femininity and masculinity are invoked in specific ways and men and women perform a variety of roles in wars which either entrench gender hierarchy and uphold gender subordination or transform gender relations in significant ways (Parashar 2015, 100).

In contrast to conventional IR studies that examine states, institutions, and causality, feminist IR scholars cite the need to expand the study of war to explore it as an experience that impacts individual bodies and social relations (Caso and Hamilton 2015; Shepherd 2009; Sylvester 2012). The YA fantasy authors discussed in this thesis tend to look at war from this perspective, treating structures and institutions as purely backdrop (or “world building”), instead focusing the majority of their attention on how war impacts the lives and bodies of the main characters, their communities, and on the physical, psychological, and cultural toll of wartime activities (Lopour 2017, 4). Make no mistake, although originally written for teens, these novels include intense themes of personal violence. The novels discussed in this thesis have content that is explicit, graphic, and brutally violent, including detailed scenes depicting murder, rape (including male rape), slavery & forced labor, bodily mutilation, characters who die by suicide, detailed violence against children, and stories about characters who grapple with physical and mental injuries, including debilitating post-traumatic stress syndrome. These YA high-fantasy novels contain fictional war stories, but they are no less valuable artifacts for understanding, deconstructing, challenging, and interacting with the social and political narratives about gender, conflict, and global politics.

YA high-fantasy fiction allows readers who are far removed from the day-to-day of global politics to engage directly and intimate with the concept of war, conflict, insurgencies, oppressive regimes, and violent women (Lopour 2017). Rowley, in her essay *Popular culture*

and the politics of the visual, notes that popular culture can help consumers “make sense of world politics” and provide a framework for understanding that which is foreign or remote (Rowley 2014, 362). As discussed in Lopour 2017, fan reactions to popular YA fantasy novels reveal this playing out in real time. One reviewer of Sabaa Tahir’s *Ember in the Ashes* explained that the novel’s take on real-life challenges is what drew her to the series: “I love that it’s set in a fantasy world with these crazy-loud echoes of real-life problems, such as poverty, slavery, and war. Sabaa has really tapped into something that’s digging deep” (Breznican 2016). Two teenage hosts of a popular YA podcast similarly explained how YA high-fantasy novels made the topic of war and conflict an approachable subject matter:

One of the things I loved so much about this book is how you see the effects of war...that is so important, especially in today’s society, in today’s world. Like, to understand how war can affect so many different people in so many different ways, is so important...How it affected, you know, the culture and how people interacted and the cities and the kingdoms...it feels so realistic because it had effects on pretty much every aspect of their lives. To me that made it feel so much more real and tangible. And one of the things I loved...is that I really felt like I was there (Aneeqah and Smith 2016).

Yet, the readers are obviously *not there*. By consuming these novels, they can experience war in a highly-anesthetized and idealized way (Lopour 2017, 5). Most YA fantasy novels have a guaranteed happy ending. Good triumphs evil, a key difference that distinguishes YA from the adult novels in the genre (Lynn 2005, xxviii). Although heroines in these novels lose battles, see their communities destroyed, and at times become seriously injured or traumatized, the “good guys” are always guaranteed to win the war and the heroes and heroines have at least a somewhat happy ending. Authors who depart from these unwritten rules -- such as Veronica Roth in her conclusion to the *Divergent* series -- face intense fan backlash. One Amazon top 100 reviewer wrote about the final book: “I feel kind of betrayed by the author” (White 2013). Other disappointed fans sent death threats to the author (*ibid.*).

War stories naturally involve stories about fighters, and many novels in the YA high-fantasy sub-genre involve heroines who are capable, effective, and deadly fighters, and thus do not fit the damsel-in-distress or woman-as-victim narrative (Lopour 2017). These female characters commit acts of political violence that challenge patriarchal systems, liberate themselves (and others) from oppressive social and political regimes, and appear to claim ownership of their own destinies in the process (Lopour 2017). Instead of relying on a (male) white knight to come charging to the rescue, these heroines rescue themselves and those around them. As mentioned earlier, the authors intend these characters to be seen as strong, feminist women who exercise their agency and challenge a masculine hegemonic narrative of gender subordination in which women are portrayed as peaceful, nurturing, or helpless victims in need of rescue (Carpenter 2005)

However, as the following chapters will explain, the author's (likely unintentional) use of the *mother*, *monster*, *whore*, and *penitent* narratives undermine this feminist agenda. These narratives strip women of their agency in political violence; instead, the women are described as pawns of more powerful men or victims of biology (magical superpowers). In YA high-fantasy novels, even if the heroines manage to overthrow powerful men and obtain freedom, their agency in their violence is not fully restored or re-claimed -- the *mother/monster/whore/penitent* narratives continue to ensure readers understand that their heroines are violent by circumstance or backstory, not by choice. These narratives absolve these female characters of responsibility for their violent behavior, and in doing so, absolve the reader of feeling remorse for sympathizing with brutal killers (Lopour 2017). This makes YA high-fantasy novels a

particularly useful lens for exploring how narratives of violent women in global politics are reflected, challenged, reproduced, and ultimately naturalized.

Chapter 3. Why did she do it? Violent women and their subordinated agency

In mid 2017, reports emerged that ISIS had begun using women as suicide bombers, a radical departure from the group's previous tactics (Bloom 2017; Rosa 2017). One newspaper reported that a female suicide bomber in Mosul was seen holding an infant just moments before she hit the detonator (Roberts 2017). These murky -- and dubiously corroborated -- reports caused debate among terrorism experts. Was this a sea change in ISIS's position about the use of women in combat (Winter and Margolin 2017)? Was ISIS returning to the tactics favored by its predecessor, al-Qaida in Iraq? Or were these uncorroborated reports picked up by a media hungry for a sensational story about a deviant, unconforming woman (Cottee and Bloom 2017)?

In May 2018, a similar narrative unfolded, after reports that an Indonesian family of six -- including four children -- had carried out coordinated suicide bombings in support of an ISIS-affiliated terrorist group. The media seemed stunned that a woman (and mother) would allow such a thing to happen. One newspaper headline proclaimed, "Indonesia's first female suicide bomber a mum of 4," and began the article by discussing how her social media accounts revealed "photos showing the happy faces of her two sons and two daughters, and also the family's cats" (Soeriaatmadja 2018). *The New York Times* reported that the mother, Puji Kuswati, seemed to be a normal mother and wife, detailing an anecdote from a neighbor about how the mother had offered to share fruit from her garden just the day before the attacks (Beech 2018). The journalist interjected herself into the article, writing: "As a parent, I wanted to understand what had compelled this family to erase itself from the earth" (Beech 2018), as if to suggest that

motherhood – or even parenthood – and proscribed violence are mutually exclusive. By the end, the author concludes, “talking to their friends and family, I realized that we would never know the truth” (Beech 2018).

Motivation: farewell to Arya’s House of Black & White

Despite the sensationalized, bewildered tone of these media articles, the phenomenon of female suicide bombers and women who engage in political violence is not new. There are numerous accounts of female bombers, spanning a variety of times, location, and cultures: the Chechen “Black Widows,” the female bombers of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the LTTE in Sri Lanka, the IRA in North Ireland, al-Qaeda core, and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) (Bloom 2011). Despite this history, governments, societies, and even politically violent groups struggle to view women as agents of political violence -- a theme that transcends government, location, religiosity, and culture (Ness 2005; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). With each new incident, the same questions are asked again and again. Why would a woman do this? According to terrorism scholar Mia Bloom, the answer is simply that “lots of women are just as bloodthirsty as the male members” of violent groups (Bloom 2011, ii).

To unpack these layers, we must first consider entrenched gender stereotypes that feed into social, cultural, political, and academic misperceptions. Feminist IR scholars have explored how persistent gender biases insist that women are inherently innocent and vulnerable. Women are victims of violence and conflict, not perpetrators, and therefore in need of protections (Carpenter 2016; Enloe 1990). These scholars have engaged in political dialogues to counter such portrayals, as well as those that depict men as inherently aggressive or inclined toward

violence and war (Carpenter 2016; Elshtain 1982; Enloe 1990, 2004; Parashar 2015; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). Since the 1960s, these scholars have argued against the idea of gender essentialism, that stereotypically “feminine” qualities are universal and innate, exploring instead arguments that gender is a socially constructed concept, learned by interactions in society and through the expectations of others (De Beauvoir 1949; Butler 1988). Entrenched, deeply rooted essentialist assumptions underpin the social/political surprise and curiosity we so often see about a woman’s motivations when stories emerge about politically violent women.

Bloom (2011) argues that women who in engage in proscribed violence have complex motivations that are rarely black or white. Some are motivated by religious or political reasons. Others seek atonement, feeling they can best serve their community through death. Some are coerced, although this is subtle and often difficult to determine. Sometimes, the women “might not even know themselves what has led them to act” (Bloom 2011, 234). However, the motivations of women who join terror groups or engage in political violence is not so different from that of men. Women, like men, can become radicalized and are motivated to engage in acts of political violence for the same reasons as men: in response to social grievances and injustices, or because of pressure by social networks (Davis 2015, 137). And sometimes women, like men, simply view violence as the best way to accomplish their political goals (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 177).

Bloom posits there are four primary personal motivations that would lead a woman to engage in suicide attacks: *revenge*, *redemption*, *relationship*, and *respect*” (Bloom 2011). The *revenge* motive involves terrorism acts inspired by the death of a close family member. *Redemption* often has sexual elements, as women see suicide operations as a way of regaining or

atonement for lost purity. *Relationship* refers to the way women join or are incorporated into a group; most women join because of a connection to another terrorist member. *Respect* involves terrorist groups casting female bombers as role models and female heroines that inspire other women to join the organization or participate in suicide operations (Bloom 2011, 234-236).

“Once upon a time...”

A growing body of scholarship has begun to focus on the role of narratives in explaining women’s participation in terrorism and political violence (Bloom 2011; Cook 2005, Ness 2005, Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; 2008). Because violent women do not fit within dominant social and political stereotypes that suggest women are naturally passive, nurturing, peaceful, and protected by male warriors, society must then come up with new stories that explain the behavior and transgressions of women who engage in political violence (ibid.).

Unfortunately, many of these studies focus on the narratives that situate men in a position of power that *excuses* or *permits* women to engage in violence. In these narratives, women are passive beings with no agency. They do not *choose* to engage in political violence -- they are merely *allowed* to do so by men, who devise the narrative backstopping to support these violent activities. Cook (2005) lays out how Islamic ideological and theological doctrine has been adapted and manipulated by extremist groups to support terrorist activities by women. Some (male) leaders/clerics rely on the classical stories that celebrate women who fought in battle during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and use these narratives to justify permission for women to engage in terror or violent acts (Cook 2005, 375-377). Secular groups -- like religious -- also rely on historical narratives, as well as those that categorize female political violence as a

form of “desperate measures for desperate times” (Ness 2005, 368). Instead of allowing women to be the decision makers about their participation in political violence, the man remains the ultimate gatekeeper of a woman’s agency and must *allow* her to take part.

One frequent social, political, and academic narrative involves casting politically violent women or terrorists as the ultimate *other*, the ultimate transgressor. These women are guilty of two crimes: (i) their violence, (ii) and their violation of perceived feminine norms (Sjoberg and Gentry 2008). Narratives about these women portray them as deviant, strip them of their femininity, and sometimes even of their humanity, and often demonizes and fetishizes them (Bloom 2011, Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; Sjoberg and Gentry 2008). Bloom writes, “the common assumption is that female terrorists must be even *more* depressed, *crazier*, *more* suicidal, and *more* psychopathic than their male counterparts” (Bloom 2011, 34), a theme that Sjoberg and Gentry expand on in greater detail in their 2007 book *Mothers, Monsters, Whores*.

In this study, Sjoberg and Gentry propose three main narratives that society, culture, politics, academia, and the media use to describe women who participate in political violence -- the violent woman as *mother*, *monster*, or *whore* (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). These narratives exist to reconcile stereotypes about peaceful women with the fact that women around the world are regularly carrying out brutal acts of political violence. These narratives describe violent women as not “real women,” but as victims of a faulty biology – a womanhood run amok – and in doing so, strips them of responsibility for their violent actions.

The *mother* narratives describe women’s violence as a need to belong, a need to nurture, and a way of taking care of and being loyal to men; motherhood gone awry. The monster narratives eliminate rational behavior, ideological motivation, and culpability from women engaged in political violence. Instead they describe violent women as insane, in denial of their femininity, no longer women or human. The *whore* narratives blame women’s

violence on the evils of female sexuality at its most intense or its most vulnerable. The whore narratives focused on women's erotomania describe violent women's sexuality as both extreme and brutal; while the whore narratives that focus on women's erotic dysfunction emphasize either desperation wrought from the inability to please men or women as men's sexual pawns and possessions" (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 13).

In *mother* narratives, violent women are carrying out their biological destinies, either *nurturing mothers* and/or *vengeful mothers*. In the latter, the narrative often plays out as a mother avenging a lost family or home, so overtaken by grief that she loses control of her own actions (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 32). Violence is not her fault or decision-- it is biology's fault, and in this narrative, the violent woman is merely behaving as nature and motherly instincts intended for her to do. In *monster* narratives, women are drawn to violence because they are "pathologically damaged" in some way (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 12). The *monster*, at times, is completely devoid of reason and responsibility because she is literally insane; it essentially depicts violent women as not even human at all, let alone truly female (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 13). The *monster* narrative excludes both her agency and her womanhood. She cannot be a "real woman" without first actually being human, and she cannot have agency in her action if she acts before thinking. The *whore* narratives focus on, among other things, the idea that women are inspired to commit violent acts because of sexual depravity/dependence, or because they "belong" to men, and therefore have no choice but to obey and carry out terrorist acts on their behalf (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 41-49). As Mia Bloom succinctly says, the overarching narrative is that it is so inconceivable that a woman would choose to be violent, so instead a man must have "made her do it" (Bloom 2011, ix). If the women who commit violence are wayward mothers, inhuman monsters, or dependent whores, then they are not in fact real woman, and the dominant stereotypes of peaceful, nurturing women can remain in place. Examining these narratives allows us to illuminate subtle but extremely persistent gender

stereotypes and subordinations, and to dig into what makes these so pervasive, so powerful, and so ubiquitous -- even in a popular culture genre that aspires to perform within a feminist agenda.

Chapter 4. Mothers, princesses, rebels & assassins

Across YA high-fantasy novels, it is common to see variations of the *mother* narrative, as described by Sjoberg and Gentry (2007), in which political, cultural and social stories suggest women engage in proscribed violence because of emotional and personal reasons -- their “link to motherhood” -- and not as conscious actors of political change. These types of narratives undercut deeper understanding of women’s motivations for engaging in political violence and exclude women’s agency, portraying them as “less political, and more one-dimensional” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2016, 24). One version of the *mother* narrative -- the *nurturing mother* -- employs implied or deliberate maternal/domestic language when describing violent women, e.g. media stories about the female “terrorist as housekeeper” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 34). Another version of this narrative utilizes the *vengeful mother* narrative, which describes women who engage in proscribed political violence as “driven by rage because of maternal losses” (Gentry and Sjoberg 2007, 34) In both *mother* narratives, women are not violent out of choice, but because of a sense of “motherhood gone awry” that drove them into such violent behavior (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 13).

Nurturing mother: all about the children

In the *Throne of Glass* series, teen assassin Celaena is often described as having mother-like qualities, including a desire to nurture, defend, and protect children; this often becomes the subtext for the violent acts she commits. In *The Assassin’s Blade*, Celaena goes on a killing spree in an effort to free slaves and dismantle a transnational slave network, but she does so only after she discovers that some of the slaves are children:

The people in the cells, clinging to the bars or cowering against the walls or clutching their children—*children*—ripped at every shred of her being...Unyielding rage boiled up so fast the breath was knocked from her. She didn't realize her hand was moving toward her sword until Sam knotted his fingers through hers...It wasn't enough for Celaena to ensure the [slave] deal fell apart. No, that wasn't *nearly* enough...Death...Especially when dealt by her hand (Maas 2014, 34-37).

The *nurturing mother* narrative describes women who engage in proscribed violence as acting in a way that is emotionally driven, rather than from “calculated retaliation” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 34); it is underpinned by broader gender stereotypes that femininize emotion and masculinize logic/reason. We see this version of the *mother* narrative in the character of Celaena -- her emotional, “maternal” and “nurturing” instincts lead her to act impulsively, slaughtering all of those involved in selling child slaves. In doing so, she also destroys the economic underpinning of a town economically reliant on human trafficking. Celaena's maternal rage has key geopolitical consequences. Her actions disrupt a transnational slave network that formed the economic and social underpinnings that kept a corrupt king in power. Later in the series, readers learn that this incident was a key lynchpin in the success of the rebellion to overthrow the king (Maas 2016). However, by depicting Celaena's violence through a narrative of a wayward, emotional motherhood impulse—rather than as a deliberately political act—Celaena is denied agency for the political nature of her violence. She did not kill out of political motivation. She did not kill in order to force a political power transition or as part of a logical political strategy. She killed on impulse, because of her innate nurturing mother instinct.

In Sabaa Tahir's *Ember in the Ashes* series, the heroine Helene is a trained and brutal killer who rises to become the foremost warrior in the empire, holding a position of extreme political power. However, her story also draws on the narrative of *nurturing mother*, rather than focusing on her qualities as a competent, strong, politically-driven military leader. Helene is not

a biological mother but is frequently distracted by stereotypically maternal urges while on missions of violence. For example, she often finds herself overtaken by a “bizarre protectiveness” every time she sees an injured or lost child (Tahir 2016, 677). In fact, the word “protect” is used in a similar context in nearly every chapter from Helene’s point-of-view (Tahir 2016; Tahir 2018a). Part of the *nurturing mother* narrative denies women agency for their political violence by suggesting that biological and maternal urges are so strong as to override mind and body. This situation plays out literally for Helene: “the pull that has come over to me to go to the child, to heal her [is] so strong that I have to grab the pommel of my saddle, lacing my fingers under it to keep from dismounting” (Tahir 2018, 114).

The *Ember* series directly connects many of the brutally violent acts Helene commits to her maternal urges to care for and protect her pregnant sister and unborn nephew. Helene’s sister/nephew are held hostage by a tyrannical madman (the emperor), who threatens to hurt or torture them unless Helene agrees to commit murder and torture innocent people on his behalf.³ To justify Helene’s actions -- and exculpate her from the violence she commits -- Tahir casts Helene as almost a surrogate mother to her unborn nephew, and thus implies that Helene is fully motivated by love for her child, not by any political ambitions. In one scene, the empire’s holy man tells Helene:

‘Know that in doing so, you will be bound to him and his purpose forever, You will never be able to extricate yourself.’

‘He is family,’ I whisper. ‘My nephew. I wouldn’t want to extricate myself from him’... he needs something deeply rooted, something that will sustain him when nothing else will: a love of his people. The thought appears in my head as if it’s been planted there. So I sing him my own love, the love I learned in the streets of Navium, in fighting for my

³ Helene’s storyline -- in particular how she is forced to commit violence by a male figure in her life -- also draws from the *whore* narrative and will be further explored in Chapter 5.

people, in them fighting for me. The love I learned in the infirmary, healing children and telling them not to fear (Tahir 2018a, 251).

Once the child is born, Helene has an immediate maternal bonding experience -- she is the first to hold the child and is described as transforming from someone for whom “babies hold no appeal” to an enthralled, speechless mother instantly in love with her child (Tahir 2018a, 402-403). To protect this child, Helene agrees to hunt down and kill her best friend, traps and executes many of the empire’s political elite, and runs political assassination operations against the emperor’s rivals. The *nurturing mother* narrative undercuts the political nature of Helene’s violent actions, emphasizing that she is motivated by love for her child, not by a conscious, reasoned political agenda. As such, her public role as the Empire’s foremost warrior still remains within the confines of stereotypical, hegemonic narratives and boundaries.

Vengeful mother: “she’d slaughter them all...”

In her study on women and terrorism, Mia Bloom notes that revenge for the death of a close family member is most often cited as the key factor that inspired a woman to get involved in the first place” (Bloom 2011, 235). This plays into a second component in the violent *mother* narrative that involves a woman who commits political violence because she is “avenging lost love and/or a destroyed happy home...so stricken by grief and fear due to the loss of their men that they have no control over their actions” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 32). The narrative of “destroyed happy home” as a motivation for political violence features in the backstories of nearly all the female heroines discussed in this thesis. But it is most prominent in Celaena’s character in the *Throne of Glass* series. In the series’ prequel novellas, Celaena is consumed by fury when a rival gang kills her love interest: “black fire burned through thought and feeling until all that remained was her rage and her prey...she’d slaughter them all” (Maas 2014, 401-402).

She responds similarly when her best friend is killed in *Crown of Midnight*: “anger burned through everything...[because] Archer had destroyed what she loved” (Maas 2013, 385). She then immediately stalks, brutally tortures, and beheads the men responsible for her best friend’s death (Maas 2013). Like freeing the slaves, Celaena’s *vengeful mother* violence has deeply political consequences; her torture of her best friend’s murder is one of the catalysts that helps launch the rebellion to overthrow the king. The *vengeful mother* narrative also undermines Celaena’s agency in her participation in this rebellion: throughout the series’ third book, the character repeatedly notes that she is a reluctant participant in the rebellion, only helping because she made a promise at her deceased friend’s grave that she would overthrow the king and avenge her death (Maas 2013; Mass 2014b). For over four books and nearly 2,000 pages, Celaena’s motivations for violence are depicted in terms of “motherhood gone awry,” a personal vengeance quest, and not as deliberate or calculated political maneuvers (Lopour 2017). The *vengeful mother* narrative absolves Celaena of considerable responsibility, because it explains that she did not *want* or *choose* to lead a rebellion, she was driven to it by the insanity caused by the murder of her loved ones (ibid.).

A similar *vengeful mother* narrative plays out in the second book of Kristin Cashore’s *Graceling* series. Fire (the heroine) discovers that her childhood sweetheart has been murdered by a manipulative villain, and she immediately -- without thinking -- seeks revenge. Her political violence over the next few chapters is described as a sort of vengeful stupor, with Fire not fully in control of her actions or behavior: “what happened next passed in a blur of numbness and anguish. . .she was not entirely aware...” (Cashore 2009, 374-375). When she confronts and attacks her lover’s killer, the story repeatedly emphasizes Fire’s lack of conscious action:

I must defend myself with illogic, she thought to herself, illogically. Archer⁴ has always been one for illogic, though he never sees it in himself. Archer...But he had taught her, too. He had taught her to shoot an arrow fast and with greater precision than she could ever have learned on her own. She stood, reaching for the quiver and bow she suddenly realized she had on her back (Cashore 2009, 384).

Fire's decision to kill the villain is not portrayed as a rational thought -- the story emphasizes her "illogic" three times in two sentences. When she attempts to kill him, she is not doing so as a rational, political actor, but within the narrative of an irrational, vengeful woman who is motivated by memories of a destroyed family and the death of her lover.

⁴ The character of Archer in the *Graceling* series is unconnected to the character of Archer in the *Throne of Glass* series.

Chapter 5. Monstrous heroines with “claws and big, big fangs”

If the essence of the *violent-woman-as-mother* narrative is rooted in gender stereotypes that suggests that motherhood is a form of biological destiny, then the crux of the *monster* narrative is that women who turn from traditional gender roles are the consummate “other” or deviant (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). In the *monster* narrative, women’s violent tendencies are “a biological flaw that disrupts their femininity;” violent women are, in essence, not real women and not actually human at all (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 37). YA high-fantasy novels are replete with monsters and inhuman characters, both figurative and literal. Celaena and Lysandra in the *Throne of Glass* series are heroines who literally are not human: Celaena is part fae and Lysandra is a shapeshifter who prefers taking the shape of “anything with claws and big, big fangs” (Maas 2014b, 313). In Cashore’s *Graceling* series, the heroine Fire is literally a “human monster,” a type of magical being that is more deadly and more sexually alluring than regular humans, and Katsa is “Graced” with a supernatural killing ability that makes her the realm’s deadliest fighter. In these narratives, the women are violent because of nature (not nurture), having magic or superpowers that genetically predispose them to violence, leaving them with no control over their innate brutality and propensity to commit violence acts. In Tahir’s *Ember* series, the Commandant -- the series’ villain -- provides an interesting contrast study about the power of the *monster* narrative. The Commandant lacks supernatural powers, but she reflects the strongest *monster* narrative of all the cases discussed in this thesis, and her storyline reinforces embedded gender narratives about women’s roles in the public and private sphere.

In the *Throne of Glass* series, Celaena is constantly described with phrases that emphasize her inhumanity and monstrosity in ways that excludes her agency in her violence.

On multiple occasions, the narrator and other characters use the word “monster” to describe her and repeatedly remind the reader that “she wasn’t human at all” (Maas 2013, 225, 379, 386; Maas 2014b, 3, 101 372, 435, 456, 464, 467). Celaena’s own description of herself contains clear components of the *violent-woman-as-monster* narrative that suggests women’s violence stems from lack of self-control and insanity:

There is this rage. . .this despair and hatred and rage that lives and breathes inside me. There is no sanity in it, no gentleness. It is a monster dwelling under my skin. For the past ten years, I have worked every day, every hour, to keep that monster locked up. And the moment I talk about those two days, and what happened before and after, that monster is going to break loose, and there will be no accounting for what I do (Maas 2014, 372).

The *monster* narrative also suggests that violent women are violent because of a biological flaw or “self-denial of womanhood” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2008, 37). We see this in Celaena’s story, when she embraces violence and rejects her place within a traditional gender role of peaceful wife and homemaker. After her best friend is killed, Celaena immediately turns on her new lover: “she was snarling, snarling like some kind of wild animal as she snapped for his neck. . . the girl he’d imagined as his wife, the girl he’d shared a bed with for the past week, was utterly gone” (Maas 2013, 235). A few chapters later, one of the men who killed her best friend tries to placate her by calling her “a good woman;” Celaena instead snaps and brutally stabs him to death (Maas 2013, 389). The reader is never asked to hold Celaena accountable for her violent actions, as the audience is constantly reminded that she “had no control” during her killing sprees (Maas 2013, 393, 395; Maas 2014b 54, 99,100, 108, 173, 375), and that her actions are not by choice, but instead stem from her nature, innate fae powers that turn her into a violent monster.

As noted in Lopour (2017), Lysandra emerges as one of the *Throne of Glass* franchise's most powerful and violent women, and her storyline heavily borrows from social and cultural narratives about violent women as *monsters*. In *Queen of Shadows*, readers learn that Lysandra is also literally a monster – a magical shapeshifter who is able to transform into violent beasts and slaughter enemies of Celaena's rebellion (Maas 2015; Maas 2016). Maas describes Lysandra as “nothing but [a] wild beast wearing human skin” (Maas 2015, 120), underpinning how Lysandra is more monster than human. In one of the novel's most violent scenes, Lysandra “shed her human skin...she was fury, she was wrath, she was vengeance...giving herself wholly to the beast whose form she wore. She became death incarnate” (Maas 2015, 568). Lysandra's violence while in her beast/animal form reflects the monster narrative at its most literal – a narrative that “takes away not only violent women's agency but their very humanity...stripping them of rational thought” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 41). Lysandra, and other violent women in this type of narrative, are not human women who rationally conduct political killings, but are instead monsters acting according to base instinct, absent human thought (Lopour 2017).

The two heroines in Cashore's *Graceling* series also reflect the *monster* narrative in a way that rejects their culpability for their violence. Both Katsa and Fire are born monsters with supernatural powers that predispose them to violent behavior. Fire is quite literally a “monster,” as Cashore's fantasy world-building includes “colorful astonishing creatures” called “monsters” that look like their human (or animal) counterparts, but are instead more beautiful, vibrant, dangerous, and predatory. These monsters are cannibalistic -- arguably the most taboo form of violence -- as they “craved human flesh, and for the flesh of other monsters they were positively frantic” (Cashore 2009, 11). These monsters, including Fire, also have psychic powers that allow them to use their extreme beauty and psychic abilities to control people's thoughts or lure them

to their death. Katsa, Cashore's other heroine, is a "Graceling," a supernatural person with special powers. Katsa is born "a girl Graced with killing" (Cashore 2008a, 9), and on several occasions she kills without thought or premeditation. She first kills by accident at eight years old after her cousin inappropriately touches her. Because of this *monster* narrative, the reader is led to believe that Katsa has no agency -- and no responsibility -- for her violence. Katsa says, "I never meant to kill him," and explains that her hand simply and uncontrollably "smashed him in the face. So hard and so fast that she'd pushed the bones of his nose into his brain" (Cashore 2008a, 8-9). The court is aghast, avoiding Katsa and claiming she killed a man "because he complimented her eyes" (Cashore 10). Later, when she kills the evil king, she is also described as acting without thought or reason -- "she hadn't even known what she was doing" (Cashore 2008a, 422). In this, Katsa and Fire both reflect the *monster* narrative -- they are inhuman, violent according to their base instinct, and "biologically flawed" (Sjoberg and Gentry 2008, 36), not real women who reject violence and are expected to accept compliments from a man.

The *monster* narrative is also prominent in Sabaa Tahir's *Ember* series, particularly in the case of "the Commandant" character. The Commandant provides an interesting discussion of the violent woman as *monster* narrative, as she is not a heroine, but instead a villain, yielding important insight into how YA high-fantasy novels use the heroine/villain dichotomy to reflect and endorse gendered narratives about female violence and women's roles in the public and private sphere. The Commandant is also the only character discussed in this thesis who does not have supernatural powers. The Commandant is doubly transgressive, first because she rejects motherhood -- she tries to kill her infant son Elias and then treats him with "years of silence and implacable hatred" when he survives (Tahir 2015, 31). Her second transgression stems from her desire to spurn motherhood, so that she can retain a position as a prominent warrior with

considerable influence in the empire -- e.g. a position in the public/political sphere. The Commandant's storyline reinforces a gender subordinating worldview in which women are supposed to fulfill traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The Commandant is one of the rare female characters discussed in this thesis who openly and unapologetically seeks political power, proclaims her political ambitions, and commits political violence in order to accomplish those goals (Tahir 2015; Tahir 2016; Tahir 2018a); the other characters are reluctant heroines, reluctant leaders, and reluctantly violent. The Commandant's political ambitions are cast in the ultimate negative light. It makes her the story's villain, and in turn the "good" and "honorable" characters in the series' novels "curse the Commandant for bringing this upon us out of her greed. Curse her for caring more about becoming Empress" (Tahir 2018a, 325). The narrative that this story reinforces is clear: it is inappropriate for a woman to brazenly leave the domestic sphere behind and unapologetically and violently aim for position in the public sphere. If she does so, it must be because there is something wrong with her womanhood. It must be because she is a monster.

Lest the modern reader sympathize with the Commandant's efforts to obtain a position of political prominence, the story ensures that the Commandant is so one-dimensionally evil, and so insanely and brutally violent that she reflects an extreme, almost caricatured version of the *monster* narrative that "at once demonizes violent women (characterizing them as evil) and ridicules them (hyperbolizing that evil)" (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 37). Of all the violent women discussed in this paper, the Commandant rejects feminine norms most vehemently (Lopour 2017), to the extent of trying to murder her infant son Elias:

'The moment I knew you existed' – her voice is soft – 'I hated you...I tried to get you out of me,' she says. 'I used lifesebane and nightshade and a dozen other herbs...You grew and grew. Got so big I couldn't ride a horse, swing a sword. I couldn't do anything but wait until you were born so I could kill you and be done with it' (Tahir 2016, 416).

As described in Lopour 2017, the Commandant reflects what Sjoberg and Gentry describe as a “pathological deviance from prescribed feminine norms” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 37), as she is a sadistic monster who delights in gratuitous acts of violence against children. Tahir goes to great lengths to overemphasize the extent of the Commandant’s monstrosity, describing how she takes pleasure in mutilating slaves and whipping children to death (Tahir 2015; Tahir 2016; Tahir 2018a). Through this narrative, the Commandant is depicted as so “pathologically damaged” that she cannot help but be “therefore drawn to violence” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 12). As a consequence of narratives that portray violent women as insane monsters, readers and consumers need not grapple with how to hold violent women responsible for their behavior, because monsters like The Commandant come with agency that has been automatically removed by a built-in insanity plea (Lopour 2017).

Chapter 6. Is she a princess or a violent whore?

Across YA high-fantasy novels, the most prominent and pervasive narrative about women's violence is the *whore* narrative, as described by Sjoberg and Gentry (2007; 2008). While there are many variations of *whore* narratives, they largely center around three major themes: that of men owning women's bodies and their capacity for violence; characterizing violent women as eroticized deviants; and narratives of women who are violent because they are sexually incapable of pleasing men (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 41-50). In the cases discussed in this thesis, the *whore* narrative may be the most effective at ensuring that audiences do not see the violent heroines as responsible for their violent actions. The first theme is the simplest, and perhaps the most consistent narrative seen in this study: these heroines are violent because they are the possessions of men and are coerced into carrying out violent acts on his behalf. Because people assume that women are naturally non-violent, the "underlying assumption is that a *man made her do it*" (Bloom 2001, ii). Narratives of coercion are exceedingly powerful, as they are difficult to refute. The balance between coercion and agency requires context – it is never simply black and white. In most situations, it is difficult, if not impossible, to authoritatively determine the extent to which a woman is coerced into carrying out acts of political violence (Bloom 2011). Even in real-life cases that legitimately involve some form of true coercion, there remains a degree of agency and choice; for example, in cases where women violated social constraints regarding sexual behavior and were coerced (or convinced) that becoming a suicide bomber would help regain their lost honor (ibid.). Even in these cases of coercion, the women still must decide to carry out the act, and in doing so, demonstrate some degree of choice in their effort reclaim honor and reject shame (ibid). What makes *whore* narratives so powerful is that

they emphasize the element of coercion while downplaying – or even outright redacting – the element of a woman’s choice or agency in any of her decisions to engage in political violence.

“I belong to him...”

Many *whore* narratives are “focused on men’s ownership and control of women’s bodies,” with men “physically and emotionally choosing their violence for them,” and women existing merely as “pawns in political violence” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 49). As noted in Chapter 1, this version of the *whore* narrative is hugely influential in the backstories of almost all the YA high-fantasy heroines discussed in this thesis. Although true life examples of this type of *whore* narrative do not always involve coercion, the threat of force is typically used in YA high-fantasy novels to ensure the reader is absolutely convinced that the heroine is not responsible (or culpable) for what she does. For example, in the *Throne of Glass* series, Sarah J. Maas gives Celaena a backstory that entirely excuses her violent behavior and actions. When Celaena was a child, her home was invaded by a rival king, and her family was murdered. She was rescued by an assassin who made her his indentured servant, trained her to kill, and forced her to conduct political assassinations on his behalf until she repaid her indenture debt. Until that is achieved, he literally “owns” her body, her livelihood, and her capacity to commit violence (Maas 2012, Maas 2014; Maas 2015). Maas writes,

Back then, she hadn’t had any choice. When Arobynn offered her this path, it was either that or death. But now. . . She took a shuddering breath. No, she was as limited in her choices as she’d been when she was eight years old. She was Ardalan’s Assassin, Arobynn Hamel’s protégée and heir—and she always would be. (Maas 2014, 44).

The story’s use of the *whore* narrative, in which Celaena and her violence belong to a man, absolves the heroine (and the readers who empathize with her) of any responsibility for carrying

out brutal acts of political violence (Lopour 2017). Celaena did not choose to kill -- *a man made her do it*.

Kristin Cashore's *Graceling* series provides a heroine with a remarkably similar backstory, also positioning her as a direct reflection of the *whore* narrative. Katsa is born "Graced" with the preternatural ability to kill and fight (Cashore 2008a). In this realm, all Graceling babies automatically become possessions of the king, to be used as he sees fit: "the Gracelings were tools of the king, and no more" (Cashore 2009, 5). When Katsa was a child, the king co-opted Katsa's agency, trained her to be an effective fighter, and forced her to use her special killing abilities to carry out political executions and punishments to bolster his own position of power:

Her anger fizzled into despair. Randa [the king] would send her on another strong-arm mission. He would send her to hurt some poor petty criminal, some fool who deserved to keep his fingers even if he was dishonorable. He would send her, and she must go, for the power sat with him. . . She was picturing the arms she'd broken for her uncle. The arms, bent the wrong way at the elbow, bone splinters sticking through the skin (Cashore 2008a, 119).

Cashore ensures that the reader knows that "Katsa had hated having to kill for Randa" (Cashore 2012, 41), and only did so because she had no choice. In this series, the *whore* narrative effectively absolves Katsa of any responsibility for committing political violence, reinforcing for readers the social and political narratives in global politics that suggests it is inconceivable that a woman would be violent by choice -- instead, it must be that *a man made her do it* (Lopour 2017).

Helene, from Sabaa Tahir's *Ember in the Ashes* series, also has a backstory that positions her within the *whore* narrative, particularly the concept that violent women are "sold to men to be used as pawns in political violence" (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 49). In her backstory, the empire's holy men selected Helene as the only woman in a generation to attend an elite military school designed to produce brutal, hardened warriors. Like Celaena and Katsa, Helene is merely a child when this happens, and the men force her into a situation where she must kill in order to survive. Like Celaena and Katsa, she too becomes one of the realm's most effective and brutal fighters (Tahir 2015). Throughout the rest of the series, Helene continues to be manipulated and maneuvered by the men around her, treated as a pawn they use to accomplish their own political aims. The holy men deliberately place Helene in brutal, deadly, and emotionally abusive situations in order to mold her character and her fighting skill, forging her into a violent, politically advantageous tool (Tahir 2016; Tahir 2018a). One of the holy men tells Helene "You are my masterpiece" and says that for her to achieve his goals, she must first be "broken" (Tahir 2016, 359). This narrative implies that Helen has no choice or agency in her violence -- her life, actions, and path are scripted for her by the men around her. In some scenes, the holy men use magic to literally control her physical body: "my arm freezes--and drops, forced to my side by the Augur. The lack of control is enraging and unsettling" (Tahir 2018a, 69). The holy men later maneuver Helene into a position where she is forced to commit atrocities on behalf of a sadistic emperor, where he uses her violence to accomplish his own political goals and objectives. The *whore* narrative -- with Helene and her capacity for violence treated as something to be bought, bartered, or traded around -- is reinforced when Helene describes herself with transactional language. She asks, "what did you trade for me?" and then notes "whatever price he paid for me, it was too high." She later explains that "I belong to him" when discussing why commits

horrible and violent acts against her will (Tahir 2016 93-94, 360). The notion that Helene commits violence because she is a pawn and possession, and not because she chooses to do so, reflects and reinforces narratives that women would not choose to be violent, and helps the reader/audience sympathize with her situation and support her despite the horrific and brutal acts of violence.

Like Celaena and Katsa, Helene also *belongs* to a man who uses coercion to control her violence and actions. The holy men manipulate Helene into making a deal to save the man she loves -- as a result, she ends up oathsworn to serve the evil emperor Marcus as his assassin, general, and executioner. Helene fully loses her agency in this situation, becoming instead the “sword that executes [his] will” (Tahir 2016, 145). Marcus is described as having a “predatory gaze of ownership” over Helene (Tahir 2015, 26), and he uses the constant threat of rape and violence/torture of Helene’s family and pregnant sister as a way to force Helene to carry out violent deeds on his behalf: “you will hunt him down and bring him back in chains. Then you will torture him and execute him (Tahir 2016, 143). Helene is clearly a reluctant participant, but she tells the holy men, “I can’t refuse [the emperor’s] order. . . I swore fealty. You made me swear fealty.” (Tahir 2016, 204). Tahir’s use of rape threats in Helene’s storyline echoes (perhaps unconsciously) the widely accepted (but often anecdotal and uncorroborated) social, academic, and political narratives that suggest that rape is a key motivator for why women agree to commit acts of terrorism or political violence (Bloom 2011; Davis 2013). Although Helene is one of the most violent characters in the story, Tahir makes it clear to the reader that Helene’s violence is not by choice: she has no agency in this story. She is not violent for overtly political reasons, but for personal ones (to protect her body, family and home). She is not violent by choice, but because she was maneuvered and forced by men who *made her do it*.

Femme Fatale

Women who engage in political violence are often “fetishized” in media, academic, political and social circles (Bloom 2011, 33). Stories about them, these *whore* narratives, focus on a violent women’s sexuality and portray them as “sexual deviants, emphasizing the sexual nature of their dress, mannerisms, and behavior” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2008, 5). Other versions of this type of *whore* narrative emphasize an element of sexual instinct, sexual dependence, or gratuitous sexual victimization (Sjoberg and Gentry 2008). These narratives “characterize [violent women] as almost exclusively sexual beings...these women live for sex” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 46).

Lysandra, another heroine in the *Throne of Glass* series, reflects this version of the *whore* narrative. Just as Lysandra is literally a monster,⁵ she is also literally a whore. She “lives for sex” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007) in that she makes a living through sex work as the most famous courtesan in her city. Lysandra’s identity as a whore is intrinsically linked to her capacity to commit violence. The first person she kills is that man who found her on the street as a child, sold her into prostitution, and later purchased her virginity -- in essence, the man that “owned” her body (Maas 2015). Lysandra kills him in the bedroom, immediately after they have sex: “for herself. For the child she’d been, for the seventeen-year-old on her Bidding night, for the woman she’d become, her heart in shreds, her invisible wound still bleeding” (Maas 2015, 373). Although this murder completely upends the power structure of the society in which Lysandra lives, Lysandra’s violence is not one of political agency and calculation, but is instead related to

⁵ See chapter 5 for a discussion of how Lysandra reflects the *monster* narrative.

Lysandra's sexuality, her attempt to regain control of her body, and her personal need for revenge (Lopour 2017). In this narrative, she is not committing violence because she wishes to unseat the most powerful powerbroker in the city, but because she is a sex-crazed whore attacking her john (ibid.).

The character of Fire, in Kristin Cashore's *Graceling* series, may be a literal monster⁶ as well, but the *whore* narrative plays an even bigger role in undercutting her agency in her violence (Lopour 2017). Narratives about violent women reduce them to "sexual objects" (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 46), and throughout the novel, Fire's character is completely sexualized -- her dangerous sexuality and potential for her sexual victimization is wrapped into her character's capacity for violence. Throughout the novel, Fire is depicted as sexually irresistible to nearly everyone around her; her magic makes her so alluring that men to lose control of their sexual impulses, regardless of Fire's own wants or sexual desires. Cashore writes, "A monster drew out all that was vile, especially a female monster, because of the desire, and the endless perverted channels for the expression of malice" (Cashore 2009, 145). At one point in the novel, Fire is sexually trafficked by villains who desire to "breed" her in order to make more irresistible, beautiful female monsters who could be sold or prostituted. Although every man who meets Fire is uncontrollably drawn to her sexual, dangerous allure, they are also simultaneously terrified and repulsed by her ability to hurt them, a characterization that harkens back to the original archetypes of violent women as whores: the stories of Medusa in Greek mythology and Jezebel in the Bible (Sjoberg and Gentry 2008, as cited in Lopour 2017). Fire is forced to either resort to violence to keep men from raping her, or to ostracize herself from all those around her -- further

⁶ See chapter 5 for a discussion of how Fire reflects the *monster* narrative.

reinforcing narratives that violent women are deviant and the ultimate “other.” Fire’s sexuality, like the other heroines discussed in this paper, “interrupt[s] gender stereotypes. Instead of requiring protection, they are the people from whom others should be protected” (ibid.,7). Although Fire commits violent acts with sweeping geopolitical ramifications, the narrative casts these actions as a consequence of her rampant sexuality. The men in the novel are portrayed as the rational, deliberate geopolitical actors. The narrative about Fire, on the other hand, is entirely personal, focused on her beauty, sexual draw, and its link to violence.

Throughout the *Ember in the Ashes* series, the heroine Helene, like Fire, is utterly objectified by those around her, described in eroticized sexualized language, and portrayed as a feminine deviant and “other.” Helene’s portrayal in the novels is completely consistent with social and political stereotypes that suggest “women are not permitted to be dangerous, unless they are dangerously sexy” (Loken 2017). In the first scene in which we meet Helene, Elias (the hero of the novel) admits to “leering” at her, and his sexual objectification of her continues throughout the rest of the story⁷:

She’s clever, swift, and ruthless. Now, in her black uniform, with her shining braid encircling her head like a crown, she’s as beautiful as winter’s first snow. I watch her long fingers at her nape, watch her lick her lips. I wonder what it would be like to kiss that mouth, to push her to the window and press my body against hers, to pull out the pins in her hair, to feel its softness between my fingers.” (Tahir 2015, 45).

⁷ The *whore* narrative, as described by Sjoberg and Gentry, also “obscures investigation of women’s actual motives” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2008). Indeed, in the first novel, the Tahir denies Helene a first-person voice, as there are no chapters from her point-of-view. Helene is only seen from an objectified perspective -- most commonly via the male gaze of the hero -- which denies the reader insight into her motivations, agenda, and even her sexual preferences and feelings. It is not until the second book that Helene is permitted her own point-of-view narrative.

The way Helene is described is consistent with *whore* narratives that fetishize women's political violence, inviting the reader/consumer to join the characters in sexualizing Helene. Helene's armor is described as designed to "accentuate her beauty" and when she dons it, she is described as looking like both a "warrior goddess" and a "bitch in armor" (Tahir 2015, 77). Helene is sexualized by the story's villains too. After she defeats a brutish classmate in a brawl, he threatens to rape her, a threat Helene faces repeatedly throughout the series (Tahir 2015; 2016; 2018). Women, like Helene, who enter traditionally male dominated spheres -- the public realms of politics, power, and violence -- challenge patriarchal norms, and their deviation from traditional norms must be explained with stories or narratives (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; 2008). For Helene, the *whore* narrative, which focus on her sexuality, is designed to undermine and limit such a woman's influence in these traditionally masculine spheres, and it reflects powerful gender subordinating narratives about violent women that "downplay both her real reasons for being involved...and any real leadership ability and position she had" (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 45).

Deadly repression

A third component of the *whore* narrative suggests that women become violent because of their "unwillingness or perceived inability to please men" (Sjoberg and Gentry 2008, 10). *Whore* narratives describe these women as "emotionally disturbed," who therefore "translate this emotional trouble into violence" (ibid.). As noted in Lopour 2017, we see this narrative feature prominently in Katsa's character in the Cashore's *Graceling* series. Katsa repeatedly and vehemently demonstrates her unwillingness to "please men" throughout the novel, emphatically rejecting any notions of marriage and motherhood (Lopour 2017). Katsa rejects the potential

husbands “pushed on her, perfectly handsome and thoughtful men,” and was “a girl who panicked at the thought of a baby at her breast, or clinging to her ankles. She wasn’t natural” (Cashore 2008a, 33). When one suitor pressures her, “you’ll want babies, I’m certain of it,” Katsa rejects the notion completely, “I won’t marry, not anyone, and I won’t bear any man children” (Cashore 2008a, 140). Even after she meets and falls in love with the hero, Katsa continues to reject motherhood and marriage: “I’ve just never wanted them. I haven’t wanted to mother them. I can’t explain it” (Cashore 2008a, 196). Although Cashore attempts to portray this as a positive indication of Katsa exercising agency in her romantic and reproductive choices, the underlying message in the stories implies that it is impossible for Katsa to be both violent and a wife/mother (Lopour 2017). The two are portrayed as mutually exclusive, and the narrative suggests that Katsa’s “unnatural” refusal to marry underpins her continued violent behavior (ibid.). Katsa is violent because she is somehow biologically deficient and unable/unwilling to settle down to carry out her “normal biological destiny of becoming wives and mothers” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2009, 10). The correlation between Katsa’s unmarried state and her ongoing violent behavior perpetuates gendered narratives of how “real” or “ideal” women are supposed to behave, positioning violent women as other, unfeminine, and not truly women at all (Lopour 2017).

While Katsa is *unwilling* to please men and bear children, Fire (also from the *Graceling* series) is *unable* to fulfill her biological destiny, positioning her within a sub-category of this narrative, that of “erotic dysfunction” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2008, as cited in Lopour 2017). This narrative attributes women’s violence to “irregularities in their sex lives...their inability to have children,” which they then translate into violent activities (Sjoberg and Gentry 2008, 10). Fire’s biological inability to become a mother is a major plot point in her story (Lopour 2017). Despite

desperately wanting children of her own, Fire knows that her offspring would also be “monsters,” and fears to pass the trait on to her children:

And what was the purpose of these eyes, this impossible face, the softness and the curves of this body, the strength of the mind; what was the point, if none of the men who desired her were to give her any babies, and all it ever brought her was grief? What was the purpose of a woman monster? (Cashore 2009, 220).

In that scene, Fire makes two decisions: she decides to permanently sterilize herself so that she cannot reproduce; and she decides, “I’ll use it [her monstrous nature] to fight for the Dells [her country]” (Cashore 2009, 222). In this narrative, Fire’s decision to fight is directly linked to her interrupted motherhood, an almost perfect fictional representation of *whore* narratives that explain that women commit violent acts “because there is something wrong with them that stops them from fulfilling their (normal) biological destiny of becoming wives and mothers” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2008).

Similar to how Katsa, in the earlier case study, was *unwilling* to please men, Helene is portrayed as *unable* to please men, and one man in particular: Elias (the hero) (Lopour 2017). Despite his sexual attraction to her, Elias does not return Helene’s love and instead focuses his attention on the more peaceful, passive character of Laia (Tahir 2016, 386-391). *Whore* narratives link women’s violence to sexual capacity, suggesting women become violent because of an inability to have sex with men (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 47). Thus, Helene, like Fire, reflects a version of “erotic dysfunction,” and her violence manifests because of her “inability to perform [her] basic function in life, providing men with sexual pleasure,” making her somehow “sexually less than real women” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 47-48). Because Helene is unable to please Elias sexually, she channels her frustration by engaging in brutal, ruthless violence on his behalf, by attempting to defeat rivals in a tournament so that Elias can win and become the next

emperor⁸ (Tahir 2016, 443). In this version of the *whore* narrative, Helene's motives for engaging in violence are not depicted as political – she does not wish to win the competition or rule herself – her motives are portrayed as personal, stemming from sexual dysfunction (Lopour 2017).

‘Real’ heroines and ‘Beautiful Souls’

Narratives often position violent women as opposites of women who conform to idealized gender stereotypes (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007), and narratives in YA high-fantasy fiction are no exception. Several female characters in these series serve as foils to the violent heroines, reflecting a social, political, and academic narrative about women in war known as the *Beautiful Soul*. This deeply rooted narrative, introduced by Hegel and further explored by Elshtain in her essay *On Beautiful Souls, Just Warriors, and Feminist Consciousness*, suggests that society believes there are specific roles women play during times of conflict: that of pure, self-sacrificing, apolitical, innocent women in need of rescue by the strong, warrior men (Elshtain 1982, 341-343; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 7-8). One example in YA high-fantasy fiction is seen in Maas's *Throne of Glass* series in the character of Elide -- a meek servant with a mild physical handicap who spends the majority of the fifth book protected by Lorcan, one of the realm's most powerful male warriors. Lorcan makes a vow to protect Elide, largely because she represents the stereotypical passive, domestic, nurturing woman who offers her warrior/protector “a glimpse of peace in the time he'd known her. She had offered him home” (Maas 2016, 537). Another character in the same series, Yrene, fills a similar niche; as a healer, she spends the majority of the seventh book helping one of the series' injured male heroes recover mentally and

⁸ He loses, which is why Helene ends up forced to serve Marcus, the sadistic emperor.

physically from a devastating injury, so that he can regain his “proper” place on the battlefield (Maas 2017).

Laia, one of the heroines in Tahir’s *Ember in the Ashes* series, is another non-violent heroine who serves both as a narrative and romantic foil for Helene. When Laia’s family is attacked during a civil war, she is afraid and refuses to engage in any violence whatsoever—she runs away instead (Tahir 2015). Throughout the series, Laia gains the support of no less than three male protectors who kill and maim to shelter her from harm. Narratives about Laia’s innocence and passiveness are pervasive in the series, with male characters constantly telling her to “get behind me,” “stay down,” “wait here,” and “you must not be seen” while they engage in combat on her behalf (e.g. Tahir 2006, 44, 60, 68, 97, 234, 492, 844). On the one occasion in which Laia experiences killing firsthand, the *Beautiful Soul* narrative ensures she is not sullied or responsible for her actions -- she merely holds the dagger, looking stupefied as her lumbering attacker accidentally “impales himself upon it” (Tahir 2016, 186). Instead of fighting, Laia embodies the maternal comforter and nurturer, cooking and feeding the men and tending to their wounds after they are done protecting and fighting for her. In turn, the narratives describe her as the warrior men’s symbol of “hope” and “life” (Tahir 2015; 2016). When Laia discovers her own supernatural ability, she learns that she can turn herself invisible during times of danger. Women who engage in political violence are transgressive, in part, because they thrust themselves into the public sphere. Laia, as the *Beautiful Soul* and embodiment of traditional patriarchal stereotypes, is the polar opposite: her superpower allows her to retreat further into the private sphere, literally disappearing from public view.

In the novels, it is implied that Laia, not Helene, wins the love of Elias because she is the quintessential *Beautiful Soul* (Lopour 2017). Elias, the warrior protector, is attracted to both Laia and Helene, but Laia -- by maintaining her innocence and peaceful nature -- is rewarded with love and devotion. Helene, in contrast, embraces her violence and refuses to apologize for killing, which causes her to lose Elias' affections (ibid.). Elias narrates,

“You’re sick...Don’t you have any regret? Any remorse? Those were our friends we killed.”

“They were soldiers,” Helene says. “Empire soldiers...who died with honor. I’ll celebrate them. I’ll mourn them. But I won’t regret what I did” (Tahir 2016, 377).

The contrast between Laia and Helene plays into narratives that “distinguish violent women from ‘real’ or ‘regular’ women, contrasting violence and true femininity” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 50). The message is clear. Peaceful women are the ideal standard and are to be rewarded. Violent women are corrupt and deviant – in sum, not real women at all.

Chapter 7. The *penitent*: becoming Peeta's baby momma

In this chapter, I propose a new narrative about women who engage in proscribed violence: the violent woman as *penitent*. In the *penitent* narrative, women's violence is depicted as a temporary aberration, rather than an inherent or sustainable state of being. In the *penitent* narrative, acts of political violence are always regretted and are overcome or left in the past. As Miranda Alison notes, "existing research suggests that female combatants are often received as a necessary but temporary aberration in a time of national crisis and need, rather than as representative of fundamental societal changes and gender roles" (Alison 2004, 458). In some *penitent* narratives, the violent woman ultimately renounces violence, either *cognitively* (by thinking/saying it) or *behaviorally* (through her actions), and she then assumes a non-violent role consistent with perceived traditional/patriarchal gender norms. Other *penitent* narratives end in death, where the violent woman sacrifices her life while saving others, and in that very act reclaims her forsaken "womanhood" and finds redemption for her abandonment of traditional gender norms. In some *penitent* narratives, the violent woman repents not just her act of violence, but also the gender roles/norms she flouted in carrying out that violence.

Penitent narratives often (but not always) occur in conjunction with other narratives about women in violence. Thus a *mother*, *monster*, or *whore* narrative can sometimes evolve into a *penitent* narrative, with both narratives reinforcing troublesome gender stereotypes. It is significant that the transformation from violent deviant woman to "proper" traditional woman, in the *penitent* narrative, is often accompanied by an implied happy ending or a tragically heroic finale. The placement of this narrative at a story's conclusion is significant, further emphasizing

biases that suggest women's violence is not inherent, but a transitional state that can be overcome when a woman reclaims her "proper" place in the domestic sphere. By doing so, this narrative reinforces dominant hegemonic stereotypes that suggest that men are inherently violent (or aggressive) and belong in the public eye, and that women are inherently peaceful (or pacifying) and belong in the private (domestic) realm.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines penitent as "a person who repents," and the term traditionally has had heavy religious connotations (OED 2005). However, the term enjoys wide usage across secular contexts, including situations of proscribed violence. In the Italian judicial system, penitents (*pentiti*) are individuals who previously belonged to terrorist or criminal organizations and subsequently disengaged from these groups and collaborated with judicial authorities (de Cataldo Neuburger and Valentini 1996); the term was most widely used in reference to former members of the Mafia. De Cataldo Neuburger and Valentini's definition of a penitent focuses primarily on the *behavioral* component, noting that "human justice must seek to avoid subtle distinctions based on personal motivation" and that a penitent's motivations are a "gratuitous sentiment" that serve "solely for the benefit of the repentant" (De Cataldo Neuburger and Valentini 1996, 9-10). Yilmaz (2014) in his discussion of former Turkish terrorists, emphasizes both the *behavioral* and the *cognitive* components of penitents. His study examines individuals who renounced the ideology of terrorist groups, as well as those who physically detached/separated from those groups. However, for Yilmaz, an individual need not have both components to be included in his definition of penitent. Like Yilmaz, I see both the *behavioral* and *cognitive* components as useful tools by which we can examine social, cultural, political, and popular culture narratives that cast violent women as *penitents*.

The penitent ISIS bride

Penitent narratives have real life implications, especially when it comes to social, cultural, political and legal treatment of the women who engage in extremist violence or join terrorist groups. In 2013, a young pregnant British woman named Tania Georgelas traveled to Syria with her husband John and their three young children. The couple was madly in love and had bonded over shared dreams: “to raise a family, train them to be assassins...or soldiers, and then eventually go join the jihad” (Wood 2017). Two weeks later, Tania and the children fled Syria, escaped into Turkey, and made her way back to Texas to live with her in-laws. She subsequently divorced her jihadist husband, renounced Islam, and met her new (non-extremist) fiancé on Match.com⁹ (Pesta 2017; Wood 2017). In November 2017, Tania went public with her story, and the media seized on her dramatic transition from modern British schoolgirl to jihadi bride to suburban Texas housewife. Articles described her relatively normal childhood in the United Kingdom, “as a girl growing up in a suburban town north of London, [she] liked the usual things—riding her bike, hanging posters of fluffy animals on her walls, and dancing around her room to house and garage music,” and then traced her path from lonely teenager to radicalized young woman (Pesta 2017). However, the crux of these articles focused on the narrative regarding Tania’s transformation from violent extremist to *penitent*, with outlets focusing intensely on changes to her appearance, behavior, and ideology:

From the way she dresses, you’d think she spent the last decade reading Italian Vogue, not the Koran. She goes to concerts. In lieu of a mosque, she attends a Unitarian church. In lieu of a jihadist cleric husband, she has Craig, a boyfriend from Minnesota, who squires her around to the wine bars and bistros of the north Dallas suburbs....She never,

⁹ Tania’s ex-husband, John Georgelas, would go on to gain fame in Syria as Yahya al-Bahrumi, one of the most senior American members of ISIS.

in my conversations with her, advocated violence or seriously regretted leaving John at the Syrian border (Wood 2017).

Other media outlets highlighted similar themes, emphasizing her complete change of lifestyle and her rejection of violent ideology:

In a sleeveless top, denim skirt, and suede heels, her hair casually tousled, she is a world away from her life in radical jihad. She takes a sip of sparkling white wine, dips a pear slice into a creamy cheese fondue... Free to think on her own, she began working on deradicalizing herself... Now she is thinking about the future (Pesta 2017).

Media coverage of Tania's story shows the influence of the *penitent* narrative as it plays out in real life. Although once a fervent jihadist, Tania (*cognitively*) renounced her violent ideology, and (*behaviorally*) abandoned her ultra-conservative lifestyle and physical support for extremist groups. Rejecting her life as a "deviantly violent woman," Tania instead re-positioned herself within a proper (Western) narrative that views idealized women as modern, suburban soccer moms who drink wine and attend church. The stories about Tania emphasize the temporary nature of her violence. Ignoring her ten-year road to radicalization, the stories instead highlight the fact that she left Syria after only a couple weeks, a *penitent* who quickly realized that she had done wrong and needed to return to the kind of life lead by "real," non-violent women. Such narratives do not focus on Tania's prior ideological commitment to extremism or the deep political views that drove her to extremist action. With the *penitent* narrative, the focus is her act of renunciation, and the clothes, food, and life she lives after she abandoned her life with in a terrorist group. Such narratives require the consumer to accept a pervasive, deeply rooted form of gender essentialism. Because the *penitent* narrative treats female violence as a transitional aberration, it forces consumers to accept the fundamental notion that "normal"

women are not inherently violent at all, and that violent behavior is sometimes just a blip on the radar during a journey of redemption.¹⁰

“Gone is the hero...”

Popular culture abounds with examples of the violent-woman-as-*penitent*, with examples from film, screen, and page. In Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* movies (2003; 2004), the character of the “Bride” goes on a vengeful killing spree in order to reclaim her lost daughter (a version of the *mother* narrative). However, by the end of the second film, her story transitions to the *penitent* narrative. In the finale, the Bride finds her daughter, reclaims her own motherhood, and gives up her violent ways so that she can raise her daughter in peace as a proper (non-violent) mother (Dornbush 2015). In the *Lord of the Rings* (both film and novel), Eowyn, one of the story’s only female characters, is a shieldmaiden who plays a pivotal role in the final battle for Middle Earth. Disguised as a man, Eowyn kills the Wraith King that “no living man may hinder” (Tolkien 1965, 127). Eowyn’s need to disguise herself underscores the pervasiveness of dominant narratives that insist women are not supposed to be violent or warriors, and when they are, it is simply temporary. In order to assume this role, Eowyn must shed her identity as a woman and temporarily become male. But the story heavily emphasizes that Eowyn’s violence is transitional. By the story’s end, Eowyn renounces her shieldmaiden ways and assumes her place at the warrior Faramir’s side, as his wife. She says, “I will be a Shieldmaiden no longer, nor vie

¹⁰ I do not suggest that *penitent* narrative are universally applicable in all cases or stories about violent women. For example, Lynndie England, who was involved in the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, was often portrayed in media stories with variations of the *whore* narrative, which emphasized her sexual connection to ex-boyfriend Charles Graner (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 67-70). This might lead some to expect her story would naturally evolve into a *penitent* narrative after she was charged and convicted. However, even eight years later, England remained unrepentant, refusing to either apologize for her actions or to the detainees she abused (Estes 2012).

with the great Riders, nor take joy only in the songs of slaying. I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren” (Tolkien 1965, 229-230). Tolkien’s personal letters underscore how the *penitent* narrative denies women agency in their violence. In killing the Wraith King, Eowyn commits a deeply political act that turns the tide of the war. Yet, readers are not supposed to see Eowyn as an example of a woman exercising agency in her political violence. In his personal letters, Tolkien says he never imagined Eowyn as a political actor or even as a true warrior: “She [Eowyn] was not herself ambitious in the true political sense,” he wrote to an unnamed reader, “though not a 'dry nurse' in temper, she was also not really a soldier or 'amazon', but like many brave women was capable of great military gallantry at a crisis” (Tolkien 1981). Tolkien’s own notes indicate he, as the author, seemed more concerned with Eowyn’s romantic fate, and whether she should end up married to Aragorn, Faramir, or if she should die in battle (Tolkien 2000).

Versions of the *penitent* narrative are equally prominent in young-adult fiction, especially in the enormously popular *Hunger Games* book series and movie franchise. By the end of the final book/movie, Katniss commits one final act of political violence when she kills President Coin (a form of the *vengeful mother* narrative, seeking revenge for the death of her sister). She then gives up her role as violent rebellion figurehead and instead lives the rest of her days in obscurity in the ruins of District 12 (Collins 2010, 389-390). The epilogue focuses entirely on Katniss watching her children play, suggesting that her story has finally reached completion now that she has fulfilled her biological destiny as wife and mother. Indeed, one popular newspaper described Katniss’s motherhood and domesticity as the thing that “heals” her and allows her to put the violence of the Hunger Games behind her (Lawler 2015). In their study *Saving the World and Healing the Soul: Heroism and Romance in Film*, McCarthy and Blaugher (2017)

reject the notion that Katniss was ever inherently political, arguing “everything is personal for Katniss...she protects the people she loves...Conversely, she has no commitment to political ideas.” Her goal is “to find her way back home” (McCarthy and Blaugher 2017, 28). This juxtaposition is problematic, as it is underpinned by dominant hegemonic stereotypes that portray politics (or the public sphere) as intrinsically masculine and the “personal” (or domestic) as the rightful place for women. The implication is that Katniss, by the end of the story, has renounced her violent ways – and the public sphere – and returned to a woman’s “natural” role of mother and nurturer. Both interpretations emphasize the notion that Katniss’s violence was a temporary and situational aberration, and that her propensity to kill indicated a type of broken womanhood that required healing, so that she could regain a proper place in the domestic sphere. Like the *mother*, *monster*, and *whore* narratives, the *penitent* narrative also denies Katniss agency in political violence. As one trade publication magazine highlights, “gone is Katniss the Hero. All of the pain, the work, the fear, the struggle in the name of the female protagonist with agency; all of Katniss is wiped clean in this image. Here, she sits inactive, wearing clothing we have only ever associated with her mother (whose complete lack of agency is integral to the story), with husband and children as her sole focus” (Gaetano 2015).

Three cases of ‘happily ever after’

In this section, I explore how all three YA high-fantasy novels in this thesis reflect various components of the *penitent* narratives. In the *Throne of Glass* series, we see aspects of the *penitent* narratives play out with the character of Lysandra, particularly at the end of the sixth

book. In the story, Celaena/Aelin¹¹ is captured by her enemies, and Lysandra (a shape-shifter) agrees to permanently assume Aelin's physical appearance and take her place. Through this action, Lysandra transforms from violent *monster*, who can literally become a violent beast, into "real woman," as she agrees to "wear her [Aelin's] skin for the rest of [Lysandra's] life" (Maas 2016). Lysandra's primary purpose for doing so is procreation -- motherhood -- in order to produce an heir who can reclaim Celaena/Aelin's lost kingdom now that Aelin is no longer able to do so. Lysandra's reward for abandoning her violent ways is a happy ending, in which she is matched with her male warrior love interest (and presumably future father of her child). As a *penitent*, Lysandra physically -- through behavior -- renounces her monstrosity and deviant violence, and she re-enters the traditional domestic sphere. The narrative suggests that renouncing violence is a prerequisite to claiming lost "real" womanhood, and this subtext reflects a powerful gender bias that implies that a woman cannot be both violent and a good mother capable of raising a suitable heir to the crown. Instead, Lysandra's violence is depicted as a temporary departure from "real womanhood" during a short period of conflict -- reflecting narratives that suggest women's political violence is just a consequence of "desperate measures for desperate times" (Ness 2005).

Helene's story, in Tahir's *Ember in the Ashes* series, also heavily reflects a version of the *penitent* narrative. At the end of the third novel, Helene gives up her silver mask -- the symbol of her prestige as an elite warrior -- in order to save her sister and baby nephew. The move is symbolic of Helene renouncing her violence: "I don't want [it] anymore...A mask is a soldier's

¹¹ In the third book, it is revealed that the heroine Celaena is actually a lost princess, and she is called Aelin in the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh book in the series.

identity...But I don't care about my identity. I don't even care if I am a soldier anymore. I just want my people to live...Because I love them" (Tahir 2018a, 430). Through the act of tearing off her mask, Helene renounces her violent identity and her position of public prominence, and her narrative transforms from that of *violent monster* and *violent mother* to one more stereotypically conventional: domestic, peaceful, non-violent mother to her surrogate son. The story explicitly notes Helene's shift of priorities during this scene, referencing multiple times the "love" she has "imbued in [her] nephew" (Tahir 2018a, 429). In addition, the story suggests that Helene's abandonment of violence now makes her a suitable love interest for a new male hero, and the two share a kiss at the conclusion of the third book¹². As with Lysandra, the implication is that once Helene is non-violent, she can take her rightful place as mother and wife, and thus receive her "happy ending."

The character of Fire in Cashore's *Graceling* series, like Lysandra and Helene, also displays characteristics of the *penitent* narrative. In the conclusion of the second novel, Fire stops fighting for the realm and agrees to become the wife of the story's warrior prince and (adoptive) mother to his daughters, nieces, and nephews (Cashore 2009). Although the character makes no formal proclamation to renounce her violent ways, Fire's behavioral shift is evident in the scene in which she considers her previously beloved archery equipment: "her quiver and her arm guard, soft and comfortable with the wear of years...a part of her wanted to put them aside now, because every time she saw them, her heart shrank around a private pain" (Cashore 2009, 453). Instead of fighting, going on adventures, or helping to save her kingdom (as she did

¹² See Chapter 6 for a discussion on how the narrative suggests that Helene's ongoing violence made her unfit for love from the novel's original male hero, who instead chose to be with the more traditional female character.

throughout the entire book), Fire becomes wholly consumed with the domestic sphere. The final scenes in the novel cast her as almost entirely in the role of mother, wife, and nurturer: her “beauty is a comfort” to her husband, she is “placid and delightful,” she makes a home for her family in a “little green house, [with] its garden and its tree,” she looks after her elderly grandmother, and she loves and cares for her husband’s daughter when he is away on adventures (Cashore 2009, 434, 445-455). Although she does not have her own biological children, Fire is described as having a “knack with babies. When they cried, she usually knew what was ailing them” and when she holds them, she becomes “shatteringly happy” (Cashore 2009, 458-460). With the *penitent* narrative, the story clearly sets up a situation in which Fire’s violent behavior was a temporary aberration -- something cast as “desperate measures” for “desperate times” (Ness 2005) -- but it was clearly not a long-term, viable situation. The *penitent* narrative reinforces the idea that Fire’s true place and “happily ever after” is not accomplished by Fire having agency in her political violence, but comes through the domestic sphere, with Fire taking care of her home, marriage, and adopted children.

In all three series, dominant social, cultural, and political expectations about *penitent* narratives lead many fans to expect certain outcomes -- what Cynthia Enloe calls “packages of expectations” about gender roles (Enloe 1990, 3). Many fans anticipate that marriage/motherhood is the natural culmination of a heroine’s story arc; in other words, once this happens, then her story may then end.¹³ Such fans may perceive that a heroine’s story is unfinished if she remains romantically unattached or has not yet had children. For example,

¹³ That is, if she survives. In some *penitent* narratives, the heroine reclaims traditional gender roles through redemptive sacrifice, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

many fans seem unable to accept that Katsa (from the *Graceling* franchise) does not get married, have children, and “settle down” into a peaceful life within a heteronormative nuclear family -- despite the fact that Katsa objects to marriage/motherhood dozens of times in the novel. On her website, Cashore notes that the second most common question she receives from readers is “Do Katsa and Po ever get married?” (Cashore 2008b). Cashore’s response belies her amusement: “Why do you ask? Do they need to be married for their relationship to be genuine? I challenge you to think about this” (ibid.). The *penitent* narrative, and its depiction of a violent woman’s transition into traditional domesticity, appears intrinsically linked to fan’s notions of conclusion and “happy ending.” Such narratives have powerful resonance with fans, who interact with these popular culture artifacts in countless online forums, sharing theories, reactions, and ardent analysis of romantic character pairings, or “ships.”¹⁴ For example, although Celaena/Aelin is married by the end of the sixth *Throne of Glass* series, fans speculate wildly on whether or not she will be pregnant if/when the story continues; even the story itself implies this expectation by discussing how Aelin must eventually reproduce to provide her kingdom with “a bloodline, a future...” (Maas 2016, 480).

Ultimate sacrifice

In some versions of the *penitent* narrative, the violent woman is portrayed as unwilling or unable to give up her violent behavior, but she uses the act of her death -- a sacrifice -- to reclaim her lost “womanhood” and seek redemption for her previous departure from traditional gender

¹⁴ Popular culture fans who support romantic pairings between fictional characters often self-identify as “shippers” (a term often laden with gender connotations). Shippers frequently connect through online forums to discuss, debate, and speculate on the fate of their favorite character pairings, even if the authors themselves have not suggested, implied, or written a romantic attachment between the characters. Active fanbases for such “ships” exist for every heroine discussed in this thesis.

norms. We see these narratives reflected in the character of “Cook” a mysterious, old woman who acts as a spy and assassin throughout the series. Readers eventually learn that Cook is the long-lost mother of Laia (the peaceful heroine). Initially, Cook reflects the *monster* narrative, with a backstory in which she murdered her eldest daughter and husband so that she could protect her role as leader of the rebellion. She was a capable and effective killer who sought vengeance against her adversaries and “enjoyed it.” (Tahir 2018a, 348). For almost the entire series, Cook rejects her role as wife and mother, rebuffing Laia’s affection with brusque words and slaps: “The touch of a child brings a mother comfort...But I’m no mother girl. I’m a monster. Monsters don’t merit comfort” (ibid.). However, by the end of the third book, Cook’s story transitions from a narrative of violent *monster* to that of *penitent*. Referring to her past self, Cook says: “[She] had no soul. [She] was as evil as the Commandant. And I’m not her. Not anymore” (Tahir 2018a, 348). Unlike the other characters discussed in this chapter, Cook’s story reflects a version of the *penitent* narrative that does not include a formal rejection of violence. Cook remains violent until the end, and she dies in a blaze of glory, shooting arrows at her enemies as she buys time for Laia, Helene, and Helene’s nephew to escape certain death. Instead, Cook reflects a different type of *penitent* narrative, one where the violent woman repents her prior rejection of conventional gender roles, rather than the violence itself. Cook’s last words reflect a version of the *penitent* narrative that insists violent women must sacrifice themselves in order to reclaim their “real” womanhood and motherhood:

‘Listen to me. One day, you will have children. And you will learn that you would rather suffer a thousand torments than let one hair on their heads be harmed. Give me this gift. Let me protect you as I should have protected L-L-L-Lis.’ The name bursts from her lips...

“I love you, L-L-Laia...tell your brother everything,” she says, “if he doesn’t know already. Tell him I am proud of him. Tell him that I am sorry” (Tahir 2018a, 435).

As the story of Cook shows, *penitent* narratives are not always stories about women giving up violence to live peaceful lives. Sometimes, in the *penitent* narratives, women stay violent until the end and go down fighting; what they repent is their lost womanhood. Nonetheless, these narratives reinforce gender stereotypes about violent women that reduce the focus on her agency. As we see with Cook, the penitent narrative does not depict her final act of violence as a political act that changes the empire's geopolitical order (even though it does). Her final act of violence is portrayed as motivated by purely personal reasons, as part of her transition from violent woman *monster* to repentant mother.

Chapter 8. Conclusion: insidiously naturalizing narratives

In December 2017, Kurdish forces announced that they had captured Emilie Konig, a 33-year-old French woman who was one of ISIS's most sophisticated recruiters. Originally from France, Konig converted to Islam as a teenager, later marrying and having two children. In 2012, she suddenly divorced her husband, abandoned her children, and traveled to Syria to marry a jihadist. She eventually joined ISIS's recruitment and propaganda wing and became one of the only women in ISIS to be included on the U.S. Government's designated terror list. Her detention, as one of many former "ISIS brides," has sparked a broader, unresolved debate among international counterterrorism specialists about what to do with these women in the wake of the Caliphate's fall. How should they to be treated? Should they be repatriated to their home countries? What if those countries do not want them? Should they be punished or reintegrated? Are they victims or perpetrators of violence?

The victim vs. perpetrator conundrum is, in large part, complicated by problematic social, political, academic, and cultural narratives that obscure women's agency in their violence. We see such narratives in the stories surrounding Emilie Konig. Media descriptions of Konig draw heavily from all four narratives discussed in this thesis. Drawing from the *mother* narrative, journalists and documentary creators focused on Konig's quiet domesticity, noting how she made tea during the interview and "worrie[d] that her crepes [would] not be sufficiently delicate" (Rubin 2018). Other descriptions questioned her reasons for going to Syria, and concluded that it must be in part because of her "failures [in France] as a woman and as a mother and wife" (McPartland 2018). Even the *monster* narrative made a brief appearance, with one *New York*

Times article highlighting Konig’s own emphatically repeated assertion that “I am very far from a monster” (Rubin 2018).

Articles on Konig also drew heavily on the *whore* narrative, referencing her employment as a “barmaid” at a nightclub, describing her as “manipulative and provocative,” and surmising that she was motivated by love and sex (McPartland 2018). A *New York Times* article took an even more salacious approach, mentioning one theory that Konig joined ISIS because she was “looking for a virile man, for a man who would fulfill her, who represented a warrior” (Rubin 2018). And finally, stories about Konig drew from the *penitent* narrative, emphasizing her remorse, desire for forgiveness/pardon, and how she wished to return home (McPartland 2018; Rubin 2018). It is likely that Konig herself sought to use the social, cultural, and political assumptions that underpin the *penitent* narrative to her advantage, in hopes of avoiding prosecution or prison.

Konig’s case is even more noteworthy because I stumbled on it entirely by chance. I did not set out to find a current case that embodied all four narratives. Her story emerged as one of the first results during a routine Google search about women in ISIS. Yet, it is no coincidence that all four narratives feature so prominently in media coverage of her story. This underscores how pervasive and dominant these narratives are in today’s social, cultural, political, and academic discourse. Once one is aware of these narratives, you find them everywhere: in the news, films, books, magazines, government policies, and even in corporate gender and diversity programs. How did these narratives become so powerful? And in the age of #MeToo and growing awareness of gender politics and gender subordination, how do they remain so?

International relations where it's not supposed to be

Over the past several decades, feminist IR scholars have sought to bring women's lives into international relations by exploring new sites of gender and global politics (e.g. Enloe 1990; Sylvester 2004; Shepherd 2009). Christine Sylvester recommends that scholars seek out international relations where "it's not supposed to be" (Sylvester 2004). Popular culture -- and in particular, YA fantasy novels -- are a perfect example of where IR is not expected to be. Readers usually do not open YA fantasy novels expecting a political treatise or a discourse on gender politics. YA literature is supposed to be easy-reading entertainment; as fantasy, it is supposed to be escapist. For readers looking for strong female characters, YA fantasy novels about kick-butt female heroines are supposed to be empowering (Lopour 2017).

However, Sjoberg and Gentry describe "a new, under-the-radar sort of gender subordination evolving in global politics: one that *tells stories about* gender liberation while maintaining the discursive and material structures of gender subordination" (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 25). The YA fantasy novels discussed in this paper do exactly this. In subtle, unexpected ways, these YA fantasy novels employ narratives about violent women that are the opposite of empowering—narratives that deny violent women their agency (Lopour 2017). In this thesis, I use three cases to reveal the pervasiveness of problematic narratives about women and violence. I demonstrate how multiple heroines in each YA high-fantasy series closely reflect social, political, and academic narratives that portray women as either *mothers*, *monsters*, or *whores*. I then propose a fourth narrative, *penitent*, which builds on the three other narratives, and I then illustrate the impact of this narrative in each case. These four narratives have major implications for understanding social and cultural representations about women's violence. The narratives

suggest that women who commit violent acts are motivated by personal, not political, reasons, despite the fact that their violence can have major political (and geopolitical) consequences. Such assumptions exculpate violent women from any responsibility for their violent actions and serve as “naturalizing” agents that reinforce hegemonic, gender subordinating stereotypes that maintain that the ideal woman is still peaceful, nurturing, and non-violent (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). Such narratives keep “our image of real women as peaceful intact” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 13), and they subtly reinforce antiquated political/social stereotypes that emphasize that a woman’s role is in the domestic sphere, not the public sphere. In the exploration of these narratives, YA fantasy novels, an area where politics is “not supposed to be,” are instead revealed to be deeply political sites.

But isn’t it all just make believe?

The fact that these narratives occur in YA high-fantasy novels (among other fictional sites) does not diminish their naturalizing power. Fantasy novels, like other popular culture artifacts, are still a place “where power, ideology, and identity are constituted, produced and/or materialized” (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 156). Readers may not think they are absorbing political dialogues about war, conflict, and violence, but powerful lessons and embedded narratives are there nonetheless. Nexon and Neumann, in their study on *Harry Potter*, argue that “for many people, second-order representations [in popular culture] are often more significant sources of knowledge about politics and society” (Nexon and Neumann 2006, 8). And as such, these high-fantasy novels serve as influential stories that shape the views of readers, many of whom likely lack any firsthand experience with conflict or with women who have engaged in proscribed violence (Lopour 2017). And as Nexon and Neumann suggest, these

stories may be even more powerful and influential than official discourses involving real life examples of violent women, who probably seem remote, far away, and deviantly “other.” In contrast, many readers feel an emotional connection with YA high-fantasy heroines and identify with the characters’ struggles to discover themselves and their identities within a difficult, harsh, and dysfunctional world (e.g. Walter 2014). It is fundamentally ironic that teen and adult readers alike relate more to fictional heroines -- who are basically terrorists in their respective fantasy worlds -- than women who commit political violence in real life.

But do these novels truly have real world impact? What exactly is the impact of these naturalizing narratives on global politics? As recommended by other popular culture - world politics scholars, I largely resist the urge in this study to establish causality along the popular culture - world politics continuum, preferring instead to examine the “how” rather than the “if/then/why” (Weldes and Rowley 2015). Nonetheless, some popular culture - world politics scholars have taken this approach, demonstrating causality between YA fantasy and politics. Gierzynski and Eddy in their 2013 study used extensive surveys to demonstrate that fantasy novels such as *Harry Potter* directly influence the politics and political views of its millennial readers (Gierzynski, Eddy and Threlkeld 2013). Ames (2013) and Morton and Lounsbury (2015) both demonstrate how YA dystopian novels inspire teens into political and social activism. Numerous studies have looked at the pedagogical value of YA fantasy, showing how it shapes young people’s understandings of politics, war, and civic duty (Barratt 2012; Dreyer 2015; Nexon and Neumann 2006; Taber, Woloshyn, and Lane 2013; Wessells and McEvoy-Levy 2017). However, I would argue that the most significant impact of popular culture is often subtle and not especially clear-cut, which makes attempts to understand the relationship that

much more important. For example, Grayson, Davies and Philpott note that “violent films or video games may not cause young men to go out and kill, but they may provide one layer in the complex continuum that congeals into deeply seated antagonisms toward particular others” (Grayson, Davies and Philpott 2013, 156). They are right -- it is hard to imagine how anyone would argue that attempts to glean greater understanding about the root cause of gun-violence is misplaced. Understanding women who engage in proscribed violence should be no different.

Interacting with problematic narratives

In this thesis, I do not mean to imply that the novels entirely re-subjugate women with gender-subordinating stereotypes. As previously noted in Lopour 2017, there are plenty of examples in which the heroines express their agency in non-violent ways. Katsa and Fire in the *Graceling* realm are characters who exercise their own marital and reproductive choices, regardless of societal pressures. Celaena, in the *Throne of Glass* series, seizes control of her own sexual freedom, choosing and leaving partners as she wishes while defying norms about what her society deems appropriate (Maas 2015). Some of the women in *An Ember in the Ashes* become leaders, despite living in a highly patriarchal society that considers woman largely in terms of future brides and political bargaining chips. Yet, such empowerment does not translate to the issue of agency and women’s violence. The use of these problematic narratives downplays the female characters’ choices/agency in either: (a) being violent in the first place, or (b) in carrying out specific violent acts. Both scenarios are heavily ironic, given that women’s violence forms the central plot point of these novels (Lopour 2017).

It seems nearly certain that the authors never intended to reinforce narratives that absolve their female characters of responsibility for their violence, and that the impact of these narratives was unintended (Lopour 2017). For example, this certainly seems true in the case of Sarah J. Maas' depiction of Lysandra, the shapeshifter courtesan who reflects the *monster* and *whore* narratives. Maas in her fan newsletters has described Lysandra as one of her favorite characters. She lists the scene where Lysandra shapeshifts into monster form, slaughters enemies, and saves the day as "one of my all-time favorite scenes" of the entire series (Maas 2016b). As noted in Chapter 1, Maas also intended for Celaena to represent a feminist heroine who is just as strong and adventurous as the heroes in male-oriented fantasy novels. Maas certainly never intended to deliberately strip Celaena or Lysandra of agency, but instead wished to depict them as examples of a strong, independent, capable female characters who overcame difficult circumstances in their backstories (Lopour 2017). Yet the way these authors interact and reproduce these narratives -- and the way their fans interact with the reproductions -- becomes a critical part of the popular culture - world politics nexus, in which the "terrain of 'exchange', 'negotiation', resistance', and 'incorporation' [is] where the construction of the political and the type of politics it engenders are formed" (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 156). We see such push and pull in the cases discussed in this thesis: the anti-feminist narratives about feminine agency are "incorporated" at the same time that they "resisted" and "negotiated."

As Cynthia Enloe explains, concepts of masculinity and femininity are not simply 'nature,' but are instead labels based on "packages of expectations" that have been created as a result of specific decisions that people make (Enloe 1990, 3). Whether or not they intended to do so, the YA high-fantasy novels discussed in this thesis have reproduced "packages of expectations" that reinforce gender stereotypes about women's violence. By reproducing (even

unintentionally) “packages” that include the *mother*, *monster*, *whore*, and *penitent* narratives, the authors ultimately undermine their heroines’ agency, and the novels instead naturalize global narratives that struggle to see how women could choose to be violent of their own free will. Should these series see their movie/film deals come to fruition, these “packages of expectations” will continue to be re-created, transformed, propagated, and consumed by even larger audiences.

Just as the novels’ authors are reproducing and challenging global narratives about women violence, the novels’ consumers are interacting with these reproduced narratives in ways that go far beyond the page itself. Each of the series discussed in this thesis have large, passionate fan bases, with fans who reproduce, recreate, and repurpose these stories and characters in fanfiction, fan-art, and even social media accounts set-up to honor (or satirize) the characters themselves. As noted by Weldes and Rawley (2015), the politics of cultural consumption reveals that there is no universal consumption experience in popular culture. For some fans -- such as those insistent that Katsa give up violence and marry Po¹⁵ -- the narratives are clearly naturalizing. Other fans take the route of “negotiation” and “resistance,” expressing their appreciation for novels while also reproducing the texts in ways that challenge problematic stereotypes/narratives and engage in political discourse. For example, several parody accounts have emerged on Twitter that satirize YA fiction for its use of dominant, often patriarchal narratives. One popular parody account, @HelplessHeroine, mocks the “strong independent woman who always needs a man to save the day!” (Helpless YA Heroine 2015). The account calls out common literary tropes in YA fiction that portray heroines as passive, innocent victims in need of rescue, which has strong parallels to the *Beautiful Soul* political narrative discussed in

¹⁵ See chapter 7 for an explanation of these fan expectations.

Chapter 6. The account's Tweets include short satirical reproductions that implicitly and explicitly deride gendered tropes/narratives in YA literature as antiquated and anti-feminist.



Figure 2: A parody Twitter account that mocks the common literary trope of the “helpless heroine,” which often resembles the *Beautiful Soul* narrative (Helpless Heroine 2016; 2017).

These narratives have serious implications for global politics and international relations. They, as a part of the “cultural imaginary,” are the sites of “significant political battles” (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 157). Popular culture can “entrench and challenge prevailing identities” (Duncombe and Bleiker 2015, 37), and these prevailing narratives are deeply problematic for not just how the public views women and violence, but also for the development of government and structural policies. Faulty narratives can lead to security lapses. As Sjoberg and Gentry explain, “stereotypical images of women as peaceful and anti-revolutionary are not only inaccurate” but can lead to “problematic gendered counterterrorism policies” that hurt counterterrorism efforts (Sjoberg and Gentry 2016). Biased or inaccurate understandings of how women are perpetrators in war and conflict can stymie post-war reconstruction, include efforts to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate militants (Parashar 2015; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). As Mia Bloom (2011) points out, we need to accurately

understand women's motivations for engaging in political violence and terrorism if we are to create better policies and improve our security response (Bloom 2011).

In conclusion, I argue that popular culture -- and YA high-fantasy novels in particular -- are not, as some IR scholars may perceive, unworthy of academic attention. A growing body of studies reveals the opposite: popular culture is "indivisible from politics" (Grayson, Davies and Philpott 2009, 155), and it is a critical place in global politics in which identities, practices, and institutions are constituted (Weldes and Rowley) 2015). As Rawls (2012) notes, "the young are often an important gauge of just how entrenched various themes may be," and I argue that YA high-fantasy novels present an influential, bloody battleground for debates involving gender and representations of women's agency. These novels unconsciously engage with *mother/monster/whore/penitent* narratives in a way that reveals truths about dominant social and cultural assumptions regarding women and violence, with serious, real world impact on the way that society sees/treats women who engage in political violence. But such conclusions about the impact of fantasy are not, after all, so far-fetched. As fantasy and science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin explained almost 40 years ago, "fantasy is a journey. It is a journey into the subconscious mind, just as psychoanalysis is. Like psychoanalysis, it can be dangerous; and it will change you" (Le Guin 1979, 93).

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