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Tracing Feminist Discourse in Hobb's *The Realm of the Elderlings*

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Abstract

Title: “Patriarchy Under Scrutiny: Tracing Feminist Discourse in Hobb’s *The Realm of the Elderlings*”

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Abstract: The high fantasy genre has often been accused of conservatism and of perpetuating stereotypes. On the other hand, fantasy has also been noted for its capacity to subvert stereotypes and envision alternatives to the current order. This essay investigates the gender politics of Robin Hobb’s high fantasy series *The Realm of the Elderlings*, exploring the depiction of patriarchal structures and mechanisms in the work. To illuminate the discussion, Hobb’s series is read alongside a variety of feminist theories, with particular weight attached to Sylvia Walby’s *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990). The essay is divided into two parts. The first part considers depictions of patriarchal structures in the series, focusing especially on sexual morality, sexual violence, and the institution of marriage. The second part points to ways in which *The Realm of the Elderlings* subverts and questions patriarchy by portraying gender as culturally contingent, historically variable, and by emphasising the performative aspect of it. In Hobb’s series, although it makes use of a traditional, pseudo-medieval fantasy world where patriarchy is a stock feature, patriarchy does not merely function as a backdrop. Instead, it is repeatedly thematised and put to scrutiny, its mechanisms exposed, and its basic premises questioned. However, this radical perspective is sometimes undermined by contradictory impulses, as the clearly feminist ideas in the work exist side by side with decidedly conservative sentiments.

Keywords: Robin Hobb, *The Realm of the Elderlings*, high fantasy, patriarchy, feminism, gender, Sylvia Walby, Judith Butler.

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1. Introduction

The politics of the fantasy genre have been the subject of much debate. Often, fantasy's potential for progressive imaginings has been rejected out of hand, the genre dismissed as simple escapism. Science fiction critic Darko Suvin has notoriously declared fantasy to be "just a subliterature of mystification" (9), and according to Carl Freedman, the genre is an "essentially ahistorical" mode "which may secretly work to ratify the mundane status quo" (43). Others, however, have come eagerly to its defence, describing fantasy as inherently subversive, by virtue of its form resistant to "any kind of orthodoxy" (Attebery "Politics" 25). Lately, more temperate critics have attempted to synthesize these perspectives, noting the conservative elements present in much fantasy while simultaneously acknowledging the potential of the genre for questioning the taken-for-granted and imagining alternative realities (Baker 438-439; Sedlmayr and Waller 2; Hassler-Forest 10).

Similar conclusions have been drawn regarding the fantasy genre's gender politics specifically. Christine Mains, while lamenting the tendency of much fantasy to unthinkingly reuse and perpetuate stereotypical gender patterns ("Fantasy 1960-2005" 64), nevertheless names a fair number of works which succeed to question and subvert such stereotypes (64-48); and Jude Roberts and Esther McCallum-Stewart, while remaining "very cautious about making any definitive claim" regarding the genre's gender politics in general (3), still point to various ways in which fantasy "can be and is being used to reflect on the contingency of gender and sexuality norms" (2).

Those defending fantasy's political potential often stress the ability of the genre to *imagine different*, and indeed fantasy, together with the other speculative genres, offers unique opportunities for picturing alternatives to the current order. However, Utopia is not the only possible expression of politics, and every depiction of the present system is not simply a reinforcement. Fantasy fiction, like any cultural artefact, can work to uphold the status quo by unreflectingly reproducing its norms. But it can also expose these norms, rendering them more visible by placing them in settings and contexts more distant to the reader, and challenging their validity by depicting them being challenged.

In this essay, I examine the gender politics of Robin Hobb's *The Realm of the Elderlings*, a high fantasy series set in a storyworld dominated by patriarchal structures and ideologies. Rather than simply reiterating conventional patterns of gender hierarchy, the series

takes patriarchy as an important thematic concern, scrutinising its mechanisms and offering a wide range of perspectives on its structures. The influence of feminist thought is notable; patriarchy is repeatedly challenged and critiqued in the series, and the constructedness of gender is emphasised. Even so, *The Realm of the Elderlings* also displays traces of the conservatism which has often been associated with the fantasy genre. The purpose of this essay is to explore the depictions of patriarchal structures in the series and to chart the different strands of thought regarding gender found in the work, feminist and otherwise.

The Realm of the Elderlings is a collective name for a sequence of Hobb's works, all set in the same secondary world. It encompasses four trilogies: *The Farseer Trilogy* (*Assassin's Apprentice*, *Royal Assassin*, *Assassin's Quest*), *The Liveship Traders Trilogy* (*Ship of Magic*, *Mad Ship*, *Ship of Destiny*), *The Tawny Man Trilogy* (*Fool's Errand*, *Golden Fool*, *Fool's Fate*), *The Fitz and the Fool Trilogy* (*Fool's Assassin*, *Fool's Quest*, *Assassin's Fate*), one quartet called *The Rain Wild Chronicles* (*Dragon Keeper*, *Dragon Haven*, *City of Dragons*, *Blood of Dragons*)¹, as well as a number of novellas and short stories. *The Fitz and the Fool Trilogy* is excluded from my study, since its final instalment was only published in May 2017 when this study was already at a late stage of completion. The remaining material will, for the purposes of this essay, be treated as one work, except where significant differences or developments can be found between the parts of the sequence. Since all of the stories are loosely connected to the same overarching super-plot, and since several characters make repeated occurrences, I consider this a feasible approach. The essay considers a large cast of characters. For readers unfamiliar with Hobb's series, an alphabetical list of characters and places mentioned in the essay can be found in the Appendix.

If we conceive of the fantasy genre, as Brian Attebery suggests we should, as a "fuzzy set" with "a clear center but boundaries that shade off imperceptibly" (*Strategies* 12), then *The Realm of the Elderlings* occupies a position close to that prototypical centre. With a pseudo-medieval setting, dragons, powerful magics, and epic plots to save the world from threatening destruction, it is instantly recognisable as fantasy, both for avid readers of the genre and for those with only a fleeting familiarity. Furthermore, *The Realm of the Elderlings* is typical not only by virtue of its contents, but also of its form. Fantasy comes in many shapes and sizes, but the most typical form of the modern fantasy is the multi-volume series (Maund 147; Baker 438); genre fantasy has developed a distinct tendency to sprawl. Commercially, Hobb's series has been very successful; her novels have been translated into

1 Henceforth, abbreviations will be used for the titles of the novels: AA for *Assassin's Apprentice*, SoM for *Ship of Magic*, etc.

more than twenty languages (“About”) and several have appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list (Wonderlancer).

More than any other subdivision of the genre, fantasy of this type—epic, series-based, commercially successful—has been routinely and sometimes indiscriminately targeted for its perceived conservative or apolitical stance, even by critics largely sympathetic to fantasy as such. Daniel Baker, despite his otherwise very nuanced approach to the politics of fantasy, summarily dismisses “those multi-volume mega-series” as “reflections, if not products of conservative politics” (438), and fantasy critic Farah Mendlesohn, in her influential *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, claims that quest fantasies (a category to which she assigns at least *The Farseer Trilogy*) are intrinsically vague on such topics as “history, religion, and politics” (13). While these claims are surely not unfounded, such sweeping generalisations are always problematic; conservatism of form does not automatically entail conservatism of content. As this essay will show, multi-volume quest fantasy is not by necessity uninterested in history and politics.

Despite its popular and commercial success, academic attention to Hobb’s work has so far been very limited; the entire body of published scholarly texts on *The Realm of the Elderlings* number fewer than a dozen. The available texts offer a diverse range of approaches to the series. Island studies scholars Ralph J. Crane and Lisa Fletcher study the “waterborne” (172) perspective on islands in *The Liveship Traders Trilogy*. Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak discusses the *Farseer* and *Tawny Man* trilogies in two different pieces. In “Lessons of Tolerance in Robin Hobb’s *The Assassin’s Quest* and *The Tawny Man Series*”², she discusses manifestations of Otherness in the trilogies; and in “...Sacrifice. To Whatever was to the Good of my Land and my People”, she examines the political systems of the two fictive nations the Six Duchies and the Mountain Kingdom through the lens of holistic philosophy. The second text has some bearings on the subject matter of my essay in its discussion of the character Kettricken. Deszcz-Tryhubczak argues that Kettricken, coming from the Mountain Kingdom to become the queen of the Six Duchies, functions as a counter-force to “the traditional masculine system of governance and cultural practices in the Six Duchies” (326). Combining both “masculine” and “feminine” qualities, the depiction of the character implies that Utopia lies beyond the boundaries of binary gender roles (326). Deszcz-Tryhubczak’s essay illuminates my discussion of cultural differences in gender roles as well as my exploration of marriage in Hobb’s series.

2 In her text, Deszcz-Tryhubczak mistakenly names Hobb’s first trilogy *The Assassin’s Quest*, which is the title of the last novel in that trilogy. Her paper does, however, consider the whole of *The Farseer Trilogy*, not just its final instalment.

Geoffrey B. Elliott likewise analyses the *Farseer* and *Tawny Man* trilogies, in three different papers, pointing to similarities between the series' Out Islands and the indigenous cultures of Pacific Northwest America ("Moving Beyond"), examining Hobb's use of the "warrior-hero" trope ("Shades"), and discussing the inclusion and reworking of Arthurian elements in the two trilogies ("Manifestations"). In the latter text, "Manifestations of Arthurian Legend in the *Farseer* and *Tawny Man* Trilogies of Robin Hobb", Elliott includes quite a lengthy discussion of gender roles in the Six Duchies and the Out Islands. Elliott notes with some disappointment that while the Six Duchies is presented as formally gender-equal, actual practice as it is described in the fiction points to the "presence of a *de facto* patriarchy", a circumstance which he interprets as a failure "to break from fantasy tradition" (26). This failure is however somewhat mitigated, Elliott argues, by the portrayal of the Out Islands as a matriarchy (28). Elliott's discussion is relevant to my own analysis of cultural differences in gender roles as well as my discussion of marriage in *The Realm of the Elderlings*.

Also pertinent to the present essay is Lenise Prater's investigation into depictions of queerness in *The Realm of the Elderlings*. In her paper, Prater adopts a broad definition of "queer", investigating some different ways in which magic is employed in the series to blur the distinction between binary opposites as well as the boundaries of individuals. *The Realm of the Elderlings*, Prater finds, "illuminates problematic assumptions and uses fantasy techniques to de-naturalise patriarchal and heteronormative assumptions" (32). She expresses some disappointment, however, with the depictions of literal homosexuality in the series, finding these "rather conservative" in their emphasis on romantic love and monogamy (32). Prater's reading informs my discussions of sexual morality and of gender performance.

Gender issues in *The Realm of the Elderlings* are also considered in a diploma thesis by Goran Katavić. In his thesis, Katavić discusses a number of male and female characters in the *Farseer* and *Tawny Man* trilogies, arguing that Hobb's work depicts female characters as strong and capable in a variety of ways, thus subverting conventional stereotypes and promoting equality.

Several of these studies provide useful insights into aspects of gender relations and hierarchies in *The Realm of the Elderlings*. However, while some of them touch fleetingly upon depictions of patriarchal structures, none delve deeply into the subject, nor do they fully consider the presence of feminist ideas in the series. Indeed, Elliott suggests feminist criticism generally, and gender performativity theory specifically, as potentially fruitful areas for future research into Hobb's work ("Manifestations" 52-3). Moreover, as seen above, former research has focused mainly on the *Farseer* and *Tawny Man* trilogies, leaving the other parts of *The*

Realm of the Elderlings largely unexplored. While drawing on the insights from the previous studies, I therefore aim to present a more comprehensive picture of gender politics in Hobb's *Realm of the Elderlings*.

Casting the net more broadly, gender in fantasy literature has been the subject of numerous studies, using a wide range of approaches. The perhaps most ambitious such project is the two-volume *Women in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, edited by Robin Anne Reid and dedicated to the study of all aspects of female representation and participation within the two sister genres. Mains, in her two chief contributions to the collection, considers works by female authors and depictions of female characters in fantasy between 1900-2005. According to Mains, female writers

have used the mode of fantasy to recuperate female archetypal roles that have fallen into stereotypes; to recover a lost matriarchal tradition in myth and history; to deal explicitly with woman-centred issues such as rape and gender inequality; and to reenvision traditional fantasy from a feminized perspective of caring and community ("Fantasy 1960-2005" 62).

However, *Women in Science Fiction and Fantasy* is largely encyclopaedic in nature, and as the title of the first volume makes clear, Mains' texts are chiefly "Overviews"; while covering a very wide range of works and subjects, they do not go into any detailed analysis. Other studies take more specialised approaches to the subject of gender and fantasy. The character type of the female hero is the focus of the various essays in the collection *A Quest of Her Own*, edited by Lori M. Campbell. Sarah Lefanu and Marleen S. Barr also consider female heroes, specifically within the sword and sorcery subgenre. Attebery discusses retellings of folk tales ("Gender"), and Nickianne Moody investigates fantasy with Celtic or Arthurian settings. In addition to Prater's study, mentioned above, queerness in fantasy is explored by John Garrison and Phyllis M. Betz.

All of these studies are in some way concerned with the possibilities and difficulties involved for fantasy in challenging current gender norms and subverting the patriarchal order. Campbell, while recognising that female protagonists have long been scarce in fantasy (4), is optimistic about the potential for the female hero to develop into "a true archetype of literary fantasy" (13), and Barr celebrates the emergence of female sword and sorcery heroes as a "genre-shattering revolution" (84), empowering to women. Moody emphasises the possibilities within the fantasy genre for imagining and creating alternatives to the present order (201), as does Garrison (229), while Betz conceives of fantasy as a revitalising escape from an oppressive reality (131). Lefanu is more moderate in her acclaim, cautioning that simple "role reversal" is not enough to challenge stereotypical notions of gender (124); yet,

she presents examples of how female-led sword and sorcery can use “wit” and “subtlety” (123) to interrogate women’s subordinated place both within the genre and society at large (123). Attebery, too, notes that fantasy’s ability to challenge patriarchy is fraught with difficulties. The genre being heavily indebted to folk tales in terms of motif, plot structure, and narrative voice, the difficulty for the fantasy author, Attebery claims, lies in borrowing these elements “without accepting the accompanying cultural assumptions about hierarchies and gender roles” (“Gender” 51). Nevertheless, Attebery mentions a number of works which succeed to do this (52), “poaching” folk tale ingredients while simultaneously redirecting their messages regarding class and gender (58).

Depictions of patriarchal structures are given some consideration in several of the studies mentioned above, but other studies can be found which take this as a more central concern. Holly Littlefield, in her reading of Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* series, explores the series’ treatment of the patriarchal world in which it is set. In the first parts of the series, Littlefield writes, the patriarchal social structure is merely part of the narrative backdrop; it is taken for granted and is not subjected to scrutiny (246). However, in the series’ fourth instalment, *Tehanu*, Littlefield finds “a mature response” to the previous three, which “truly reflects women’s experience in that world and offers some harsh criticism of it” (251). As Littlefield’s paper makes clear, there is a fine line for authors using patriarchal settings between critique of patriarchal structures on the one hand, and simple reiteration of them on the other hand. In my essay, I consider the degree to which *The Realm of the Elderlings* manages to keep to one side of that line.

Taking a more specific approach, Suanna Davis considers depictions of rape in a number of speculative fiction works. Comparing the representations of rape and its aftermath in the fiction with research into the experience of actual rape survivors, Davis concludes that the included works “break a cultural silence and present the experiences of rape survivors in an unambiguous and realistic manner” (19-20), thus contributing to a correction of “societal misunderstandings of rape” (20). Davis’s study is relevant for my discussion of sexual violence in Hobb’s series.

Depictions of patriarchy are central, too, to Jane Tolmie’s analysis of a number of overtly feminist high fantasy works. These works, Tolmie writes, act out “the dispossession of women in order to highlight feminine resistance to that dispossession” (149), juxtaposing heavily patriarchal pseudo-medieval settings with female protagonists who struggle against the restrictions imposed on them by that milieu. Tolmie is sceptical, however, of the political force of such works. She points out that the qualities which mark the protagonists as heroic

require a context in which women generally conform to ideologies of passive and subordinated femininity; despite its feminist aims, Tolmie argues, the subgenre relies on an understanding of assertive and independent women as exceptional. The feminist victory achieved by these heroines is thus highly individualistic; “the general condition” of female oppression “is *not* fixed or overturned” (154). Moreover, Tolmie expresses concern that the overt feminist message of such fantasy works may function merely as an excuse, allowing writers and readers to continue reproducing and enjoying the kind of “stable, predictable world [...] in which the disenfranchisement of women is still the general condition” (156). Tolmie’s analysis is highly compelling, and although *The Realm of the Elderlings* is not included in her material, her text is nevertheless very relevant in relation to Hobb’s series. While I do not entirely share Tolmie’s pessimism about the political potential of overtly feminist high fantasy, her thoughtful and challenging insights will illuminate and problematise my discussion at several points in the essay.

“In creating a fantasy world anything is possible; therefore writers, artists, directors, creators and producers of fantasy worlds must acknowledge a degree of responsibility for their world beyond that of other creators”. Thus write Roberts and McCallum-Stewart regarding the political force of fantasy (2). Anything is possible; yet many fantasy worlds are startlingly alike, taking as their setting “a very specific past, namely a usually clichéd version of the European Middle Ages” (Emig 85), with feudalism and patriarchy as stock features of social structure (87). What effect does this choice of setting have on the politics of the story? What is the responsibility of the author who chooses a fantasy world based in history? And what can be the relevance in the present of the ideology of an imaginary past?

Sometimes, medievalist fantasy works are understood in simple terms as depictions of historical time, misogynist and other problematic features accordingly excused as faithful renderings of the attitudes of that historical period. Such a conception can be seen, for example, in the comments cited by Valerie Estelle Frankel regarding the TV series *Game of Thrones* (1), and is also evident in Katavić’s argument (44). Mariah Larsson, too, comes perilously close to such a line of reasoning when she argues that George R. R. Martin’s fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* “needs to connect with our concepts of history in order to provide that ‘suspension of disbelief’ necessary to appreciate any story” (19).

However, medievalist fantasy works are not historical documents. Despite drawing “freely on an apparent body of received knowledge and information (and misinformation [...]) about the medieval period” (Tolmie 149), their concern is not, as Larsson herself later clarifies, with history so much as with “*our contemporary ideas and conceptions*” (19;

emphasis mine) of history. Moody argues that a historical setting provides the female fantasy writer with an opportunity to “re-evaluate women’s history from her own perspective” (187). This may well be the case—but the re-evaluation always reveals more about the writer’s perspective than about the historical period which she depicts (or, more commonly, from which she borrows certain elements); any work of literature is primarily a product of the time and place which produced it. This is true for historical fiction as well as for fantasy; however, in fantasy, the considerable freedom to pick and choose which components of historical time to include or exclude renders especially interesting the choices made. In fantasy, anything is indeed possible. Therefore, conformity to genre conventions is a matter of choice as much as is departure from them, and either has political implications, although their precise content is not always clear-cut. *The Realm of the Elderlings*, despite its pseudo-medieval setting, is a product of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and in its treatment of gender issues, it clearly engages with contemporary feminist thought.

For my definition of patriarchy in this paper, I chiefly rely on Sylvia Walby’s *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990), finding its theoretical perspective as well as its comprehensive scope particularly useful in relation to Hobb’s series. Walby defines patriarchy as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (20). Aiming to synthesise the perspectives of Marxist feminism and radical feminism, Walby argues for a conception of patriarchy as resting simultaneously on several bases, ideological as well as material, and she names six such bases or structures of patriarchal power in the contemporary West: paid employment, the household, culture, sexuality, violence, and the state (7). Although these structures interact to a certain degree, Walby still perceives them as “relatively autonomous” (20); each operates according to its own internal logic, and none is entirely dependent upon another. Moreover, the relative importance of the different structures to the patriarchal system as a whole varies geographically and historically (177). In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, too, patriarchy is depicted as operating simultaneously in several different spheres of society. Walby’s account of the workings of patriarchal structures will be used in this essay as a point of departure for my exploration of the depictions of such structures in Hobb’s work. Other feminist theorists will be used as complements, providing more specialised insights into each of the specific structures, as the various strands of feminist influence upon Hobb’s series are mapped out.

The concept of “patriarchy” has sometimes been criticised as universalising (see, for example, Butler “Gender” 48). However, with Walby’s definition I do believe that the concept is sufficiently flexible to be applicable to a wide variety of versions of structural domination

of women. As Walby writes, “[w]hile gender relations could potentially take an infinite number of forms, in actuality there are some widely repeated features” (16). I agree with Walby that “the concept and theory of patriarchy is essential to capture the depth, pervasiveness and interconnectedness of different aspects of women’s subordination” (2), and therefore, I have chosen to use “patriarchy” in this essay as an umbrella term for the different versions of male dominance found in Hobb’s series.

Walby distinguishes between two main forms of patriarchy: the private and the public. In the private form of patriarchy, women are excluded from the public sphere and confined to the private household, each subjected to the direct control of one man (e.g. a father or a husband) who holds the exclusive right to her labour and her sexuality (178). In the public form of patriarchy, on the other hand, women are not excluded from any spheres of society, but are instead segregated and subordinated within each of them; and their labour and sexuality are exploited by men on a more collective level, through unequal wage levels and through the expectation that they be sexually available to men (178). The public and the private forms, Walby stresses, should not be understood as mutually exclusive, but rather as the poles of a continuum (180), and the form of patriarchy is further variable through the different possible modes of interaction between the named six patriarchal structures (177). Differences of form, moreover, should not be conflated with differences in the degree of oppression (174). In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, Hobb depicts oppression of women as varied and dynamic, yet systematic (the work also contains examples of non-patriarchal social organisation, as will be discussed in section 3.i). Walby’s theory of public and private patriarchy allows for the existence of numerous different forms of patriarchal systems, providing a model for the analysis of their differences and similarities. It is therefore very well suited to an investigation of the gender politics in Hobb’s work.

However, while I largely follow Walby’s conception of patriarchy, and while I find her description of the workings of its individual structures very valuable, I believe she is mistaken in naming “culture” as one such structure, ostensibly on par with “paid employment” or “violence”. Although the category of “culture” is initially presented as comprising institutions such as “religions, education and the media” (21), Walby’s chapter on the subject mainly focuses on cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity, i.e. the construction of binary gender as such (90-108). But cultural ideas about gender do not make up a closed, semi-autonomous sphere comparable with the household or the state; instead they imbue all of the structures of society, *providing the rationale* for patriarchal practices such as segregated employment, unequal division of housework, the sexual double standard, differential legal

rights, etc. Indeed, Walby herself acknowledges this, writing: “Ideas about masculinity and femininity are to be found in all areas of social relations; they are part of the actions which go to make up patriarchal structures” (90), furthermore asserting that “gendered subjectivity is created everywhere, [...] there is no privileged site” (104). These insights, however, are masked through Walby’s naming of culture as one out of her six patriarchal structures. This paper, then, rests firmly on the assumption that the cultural construction of binary gender forms the very core of the patriarchal system. Patriarchy relies on a conception of the masculine and the feminine as two contrasting halves, “as different as day and night, earth and sky, yin and yang, life and death” (Rubin 179), men and women therefore being suited to different tasks, different treatment, and different levels of influence. Without the conception of binary gender, there could be no patriarchy; as Gayle Rubin writes, “we are not only oppressed as women, we are oppressed by having to *be* women, or men as the case may be” (204). Consequently, the construction of binary gender roles in *The Realm of the Elderlings* is of major interest to this essay.

The concrete and practical feminist perspective of theorists such as Walby is for the most part appropriate for the understanding of patriarchy in Hobb’s series—like Walby, Hobb apparently believes that “the signifiers of ‘woman’ and ‘man’ have sufficient historical and cross-cultural continuity, despite some variations to warrant using such terms” (Walby 16). At times, however, *The Realm of the Elderlings* appears to go further than a simple critique of patriarchal oppression, targeting and questioning the basic premise of binary gender itself. For the analysis of such passages, Judith Butler’s post-structural gender theory has some illuminating insights to offer and will be used as a complement.

In addition to the ideas found in *The Realm of the Elderlings*, I also consider the rhetorical and narrative strategies by which these ideas are brought across. As Tolmie wryly notes, “[t]he extent to which contemporary fantasy is meant to be didactic is not always clear, though it is at least clear that this is an important element to be considered” (150). Stylistically, much fantasy relies on explicit commentary and “heavy-handed” imagery in order to create analogies with the contemporary world (151). In my paper, I examine the extent to which such tools are used in Hobb’s series, and the effect created by them. I also investigate Hobb’s use of other strategies, such as presenting “bad” examples in order to critique a structure, or holding certain characters forth as role models.

This study considers a large body of material, seeking to chart a tendency found throughout *The Realm of the Elderlings*. In order to illustrate this tendency, examples are chosen from the entire body of the series. By necessity, the primary focus is on general trends

rather than on the particularities of specific instances. However, contradictory impulses are also noted and discussed. Occasionally, especially noteworthy examples are selected for closer and more detailed analysis.

The essay consists of two main chapters, each divided into three sub-sections. In the first chapter, “Patriarchy Portrayed”, I take a thematic approach to patriarchal structures in *The Realm of the Elderlings*. Using as my point of departure the focus areas of sexual morality, sexual violence, and marriage, I consider how patriarchal structures are depicted and discussed in Hobb’s series. In the second chapter, “Patriarchy Undermined”, I investigate three ways in which *The Realm of the Elderlings* engages more directly with patriarchy as a system, challenging and disrupting its basic foundations by depicting it as culturally contingent, historically variable, and by highlighting the performative aspects of gender, ultimately questioning the notion of binary gender itself.

2. Patriarchy Portrayed

In this chapter, I explore depictions of patriarchal structures in *The Realm of the Elderlings*. Kathleen Gough, in an essay on the origin of the family, lists the following expressions of patriarchal oppression:

men's ability to deny women sexuality or force it upon them; to command or exploit their labor to control their produce; to control or rob them of their children; to confine them physically or prevent their movement; to use them as objects in male transactions; to cramp their creativeness; or to withhold from them large areas of the society's knowledge and cultural attainments (69-70)

The first item on her list, “men's ability to deny women sexuality or force it upon them”, succinctly captures the double-sidedness of the male control of women's bodies which is so central to many schools of feminist thought. This twofold sexual control is the focus of the first two sections of this chapter: the first exploring issues of sexual morality in Hobb's series, the second scrutinising the depiction of sexual violence and objectification. In the third section of this chapter, I turn to depictions of marriage, an institution which may in some respects be understood as combining both types of sexual control. Yet marriage also plays a crucial part for the economic aspect of patriarchy. Although patriarchy operates simultaneously in several different structures, these are all interlocked; and although I have chosen three specific focus areas around which to structure my discussion of patriarchal mechanisms in Hobb's work, almost all of the oppressive strategies listed by Gough will be seen at work.

I. I'd Rather be Dead than a Mother with No Husbandman

Sexual Morality and the Double Standard

Within the “private” patriarchal strategy, Walby writes, “women's sexuality is directed to one patriarchal agent for a lifetime and a plethora of practices exist to prevent her sexual interest from wandering” (124). These practises operate variously by denying the existence of women's sexuality altogether; by physically limiting women's access to sexual fulfilment; or else by investing women's sexual expressions with shame and stigma³. One such practice is

³ For an extensive list of examples of such practices, see Adrienne Rich (638).

slut-shaming, “the act of criticizing or insulting individuals for their perceived sexual availability, behavior, or history” (Gong and Hoffman 580). Slut-shaming, as Lewis Mark Webb notes, is an age-old practice; but it endures vigorously to this day (Webb; Gong and Hoffman; Poole). In the absolute majority of cases, slut-shaming is directed at women; behaviour or expressions which get girls or women denounced as “sluts” and subjected to humiliation, ridicule, and ostracism normally carry no such repercussions for boys or men (Gong and Hoffman 580-1; Poole 222). This sexual double standard, Walby argues, constitutes one of the “key forms” of patriarchal sexual oppression (21). In this section, I focus on depictions of such practises of shaming and restraining as found in *The Realm of the Elderlings*, ultimately attempting to pinpoint the code of sexual morality suggested by the work itself.

In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, Hobb repeatedly grapples with the issue of women’s sexuality and the restrictions put upon it. In most societies portrayed in the series, women’s sexuality is rigidly restrained and associated with shame⁴. The social status of a woman is firmly connected to her sexual behaviour; pre-marital sex is severely stigmatised, bringing “ruin” to the woman (*SoM* 500; *MS* 91; *FE* 395; *GF* 266 etc.), and motherhood outside of wedlock, being the most obvious sign of such a transgression, is considered deeply shameful both to the mother and to the child thus conceived. “I’d rather be dead than a mother with no husbandman!” kitchen maid Timbal agonises after having been seduced by a handsome minstrel (“Blue Boots” 36); and FitzChivalry, illegitimate son of a prince of the Six Duchies, is told by a stranger, in conversational tones, that “at one time bastards were drowned at birth”, a comment followed up with the question, “[h]ow did your mother’s people accept her whoredom?” (*RA* 132-3).

For Hobb’s female characters, the threat of being subjected to slut-shaming is ever present and real, and Hobb vividly depicts the anguish caused them by this threat. After having intercourse with her friend Brashen, Althea Vestrit chides herself for “behaving like a slut” (*MS* 91), and walks in fear of exposure: “He knows he can ruin me with that. All he has to do is brag to the right person. Or the wrong person” (*MS* 474). Molly, girlfriend of FitzChivalry, is intimidated by unknown men who threaten to “make sure everyone knew [she] was the Bastard’s whore” (*RA* 538); and Timbal, like Althea, internalises the shame which her society connects to pre-marital sex. Denouncing herself as “a silly strumpet”

⁴ The matriarchal culture of the Out Islands is an exception to this rule; see chapter 3.i for further discussion of its sexual norms.

(“Blue Boots” 31), she imagines that other people consider her “an idiotic slut” (34-35) and wishes she “could just die” (31).

The connection between a restrictive sexual morality for women and the private patriarchal strategy is made explicit by Timbal. She laments the fact that she will “never be able to look her husband in the face and say, 'Never have I known any man but you'”, knowing that “to some men, that would matter a great deal when it came time to broker a marriage” (“Blue Boots” 28). A woman’s chief worth in the private patriarchal system, Hobb’s story makes clear, is as a commodity on the marriage market, and virginity — “the coin that a woman can only spend once” (28) — is a much sought-after property on this market. By depriving her hypothetical future husband of his lifelong exclusive right to her body, Timbal has thus debased her own value as a woman.

In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, the “purity” of a woman does not only determine her own social standing, but affects that of her family as well. Delving into the workings of the patriarchal “honour culture”, Hobb’s series depicts the logic which compels family members to shame, restrict, confine, and even hurt their own in order to defend the family’s honour. Althea’s brother-in-law Kyle threatens to “lock her in her room for a week” if she will not comply with his standards of appropriate feminine behaviour, desiring to “[m]ake it plain to her that we won’t tolerate her blackening the family name” (*SoM* 221); and Fitz cautions his adolescent foster son Hap about the possible consequences for his girlfriend Svanja if Hap will not refrain from having sex with her: “What will you do if her father turns her out? Or beats her? What will you do if she suddenly finds herself ostracized and condemned by her friends?” (*GF* 271-2). In the patriarchal cultures depicted by Hobb, abandonment, violence, and ostracism are normal and expected reactions to a young woman’s active sex life.

Webb points out that women, as well as men, participate in slut-shaming. This is the case in *The Realm of the Elderlings* too, as female family members take part in the shaming and restraining of their younger female relatives. Althea’s sister Keffria declares her a “slut and a whore and a shame to [her] family name” (*SoM* 500); and she further cautions her adolescent daughter Malta against “too much curiosity and eagerness” about men (*SoM* 430). Here, Hobb depicts patriarchy as upheld by men and women both—a recurrent theme in the series, as will be seen in the other sections of this essay.

The sexual double standard is a firmly integrated part of the patriarchal systems depicted in *The Realm of the Elderlings*. While boys and men may be criticised for their sexual conduct, they are not branded as “sluts” or find themselves locked up in order to

protect the family name. Occasionally, Hobb uses more direct means to call attention to the workings of the double standard. “Why can’t [Svanja’s father] just keep his daughter in at night? Then no one would have a problem,” an exasperated Fitz declares, agonising over the sexual lives of Hap and Svanja. “No one would have a problem if you could just keep your son in at night,” Fitz’s friend counters, neatly revealing the underlying hypocrisy of Fitz’s argument (*GF* 334). A further example can be seen as Queen-in-Waiting⁵ Caution, unmarried and pregnant, is threatened with disinheritance. Her father, delivering this threat, simultaneously admits that “had she been his son, folk would have shrugged off her breach of conduct” (*WP* 56). Here, the sexual double standard is made quite explicit, the unfairness of it laid bare.

Hobb’s series notes, however, that the sexual double standard has a flip side, and in *The Realm of the Elderlings*, the practice is carefully turned over and examined from all conceivable angles. If women risk disgrace and hardship as consequences of their sexual lives, a woman who has socially unsanctioned sex with a man may be conceived as his victim, even if her participation is consensual. Thus, when Fitz chides Hap for his sexual behaviour, his concern is for Svanja, not Hap; it is she who is shamed and hurt by their mutual sex acts, and thus, in Fitz’s opinion, Hap should refrain from sex in order to protect her (*GF* 271). Althea’s suitor Grag expresses similar sentiments, denouncing Brashen for “dishonour[ing]” and “compromis[ing]” Althea. “He’s a man. [...] He should have been protecting you, not taking advantage of your weakness” he declares (*MS* 496). Althea reacts to Grag’s words with affront: “Was this how he really viewed her? As a weak and helpless creature, to be guided and protected by whatever man happened to be closest to her?” (*MS* 496). Through Althea’s outrage, Hobb expresses a critique of unequal moral standards of any kind. Double standards, she thus suggests, are insulting and belittling, regardless of whether sexually active women are viewed as immoral and unclean or as helpless victims of male lust.

One important exception from the sexual double standard in the series, which cannot be disregarded, is the case of Chivalry, father to FitzChivalry. Fitz’s uncertain status as a royal bastard is important both for his characterisation and as a plot element, and the fate of his father is interesting, especially in comparison to that of Queen-in-Waiting Caution. As the existence of his illegitimate son is discovered, Chivalry, then King-in-Waiting of the Six Duchies, chooses to abdicate the throne and retire to a life in seclusion. In this case, notably,

5 Queen- (or King-) in-Waiting is a title in the Six Duchies, given to the heir apparent as he or she reaches majority.

the male successor's "breach of conduct" is *not* "shrugged off" (WP 56). Chivalry's act of abdication, however, is depicted as an exceptional case in the patriarchal Six Duchies. It is largely upheld as a sign of his extraordinarily honest nature (AA 10) and appears to be a self-inflicted punishment rather than an effect of outside pressure. Indeed, Chivalry's father King Shrewd believes that the existence of an illegitimate child may work to *increase* his popularity by showing the rigid and strict Chivalry in a more "human" light (AA 15). The sexual moral standards which force Chivalry to abdicate in shame seem thus to be largely his own, rather than those of the surrounding society. Generally speaking, males in *The Realm of the Elderlings* are still granted considerably more sexual freedom than their female peers.

The rigid control and shaming of women's sexuality which is the norm of most of the series' storyworld is contrasted in Hobb's series with the minstrel subculture of the Six Duchies. The minstrels, regardless of gender, are exempted from the sexual morality of the rest of their society. Leading largely wandering lives, they sleep "where and with whom they [please]", and a system of minstrel guilds and associations ensure the support of the children of female minstrels ("Blue Boots" 2-3). "I belong to myself, and I shall decide who shares my body," the minstrel Starling declares, angrily rejecting the idea that any man could claim exclusive ownership of her sexuality. "It hurts nothing for me to be with both of you" (FE 63). The minstrel system, with its liberal attitude to sex, stands as an alternative in the series to the moral standards of private patriarchy.

The Realm of the Elderlings does not, however, truly embrace this ideology of free love. While Hobb's series does depict the misery caused by the shaming and denial of women's sexuality, it also problematises sexual liberation. Prater complains of conservatism in Hobb's depictions of sexual relationships (31-2), and the ideal promoted by the series is indeed, as Prater notes, monogamous, permanent, and love-based (32). "Why can't people be like butterflies, coming together in bright sunshine and parting while the day is still bright?" Althea rhetorically asks. "Because they are people, not butterflies," her friend Amber retorts (MS 298), adding: "When you bed someone, there is always a commitment. Sometimes that commitment is only that you will both pretend it doesn't matter" (MS 299). For in Hobb's *The Realm of the Elderlings*, intercourse *does* matter. Sex in Hobb's series is always serious, always capable of "hurting" something or someone.

Neither does the series hesitate still further to complicate the issue of the sexual double standard. The character Bellin is made a spokesperson for conservative sexual morality as she, in a highly charged scene, lectures to a group of adolescent girls on the

dangers of sex while simultaneously assisting one of them who is undergoing a miscarriage. “If you don't have a partner ready to put it on the line for you, to the last drop of blood in his body, well, then you're a fool if you spread your legs” (*DH* 449), she tells them, pointing to the various risks accompanying pregnancy and insisting that “there's a reason for the rules. The rules are to keep you from hurting yourself” (*DH* 451). Bellin's chief advice to the teenage girls is, then, to follow the rules of the patriarchal system in order to protect themselves. While she admits that the double sexual standard is “not fair” (*DH* 449), she nevertheless makes clear that she endorses the use of both shaming and violence as means of keeping it up: “If I catch you opening your legs to a boy on this ship, keeper or crew, it's going to hurt. And humiliate. Because that's a lot better than what we just had to go through here today,” she tells the girls (*DH* 452). Prater, understandably, finds this passage highly problematic. The series mostly presents Bellin in a sympathetic light, and her expressed opinions thus do have some relevance for the understanding of the ideology of the work itself. Prater argues that Bellin's argument “stresses the representation of women as vulnerable and in need of a protector” (32). Prater's complaint is certainly valid; but in addition, Bellin's argument also points to the inherent inequality of sexual liberation, especially in societies lacking reliable contraception. “[W]ho is the work falling on?” Bellin rhetorically asks. “You see any boys or men in this room?” (*DH* 449). Pregnancy and childbirth, and, in patriarchal societies, often childcare as well, are tasks that fall on those with wombs, not on those without them; and thus, *The Realm of the Elderlings* stresses, sex is never as “free” for females as it is for males⁶. In “Blue Boots”, Timbal's handsome minstrel strives to avoid her questions as to the nature of their relationship, telling her: “This is a time to savor the moment, Blue Boots, not map out all of our lives”. Timbal retorts: “Spoken like someone who cannot get pregnant,” being acutely aware that “until she bled again, she must fret and fret” (“Blue Boots” 25-6). Walby points out that segments of the early feminist movement, as well as many conservative women today, “have supported the form of sexual relations in which sexuality is restricted to marriage for both women and men, because they see a free market in sexual partners to be to their disadvantage” (125). Thus, as Walby writes, women who support restrictive sexual morals are not necessarily acting from “false consciousness”, but from “their perception of their own real interests in a patriarchal society not of their making” (126). Bellin's advocacy of a restrictive sexuality is not based in any abstract ideals

⁶ Sex, of course, denotes a wide range of practices of which heterosexual vaginal intercourse is only one. However, as long as persons with male bodies can engage in this particular form of sex with less risk to themselves than persons with female bodies, the contention that sex is less free for females than for males still stands.

concerning decency or the sacredness of marriage, but instead in pure pragmatism; indeed, it is not matrimony which she considers a necessary condition for child bearing, but merely the presence of “a true partner, one with guts” (*DH* 449). In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, viewpoints such as Bellin’s carry substantial weight.

Moreover, despite its criticism of patriarchal restrictions on female sexuality, *The Realm of the Elderlings* cannot quite be said to be free of complicity in the “culture of slut-shaming” (Gong and Hoffman 580). Happily promiscuous characters like Starling, Svanja, or the dragon keeper Jerd are largely depicted in a negative light. Starling is depicted as selfish and shallow. “She has no true affection for Fitz, you know, only for being able to say she knew FitzChivalry,” Fitz’s friend the Fool tells him (*AQ* 480). Svanja turns out to be a gold digger, using up money which Hap has entrusted to her for safekeeping in order to attract a more affluent suitor (*FF* 862). Coupling these unflattering characterisations with an emphasis on the characters’ readiness to engage in sexual activities, *The Realm of the Elderlings* unavoidably links promiscuity to selfishness, shallowness and faithlessness. “Jerd will go with anyone” her one-time sex-partner Tats sneers (*DH* 118), and with its characterisation of Jerd as a thoughtless, attention-seeking, “nasty bitch” (*DH* 365), Hobb’s work appears to sneer with him.

In Hobb’s *The Realm of the Elderlings*, sexual morality is treated as a highly complex issue, and a great variety of standpoints are given room. While the series labours to expose the hypocrisy of the sexual double standard and call attention to the harm caused by the shaming of female sexuality, it also questions the idea of free sex, and provides substantial space for conservative arguments. Altogether, the treatment of sexual morality in *The Realm of the Elderlings* does come across as rather conservative. It is, however, a conservatism firmly grounded in an awareness of the workings of patriarchy. Despite its occasional lapses into the routine of slut-shaming, *The Realm of the Elderlings* largely defends women’s right to sexual expression and advocates a moral standard based on equality.

II. Just Plain Old-fashioned Choking, Slapping, and Rape

Sexual Violence and Objectification

As Gough so aptly captures, patriarchal control of female bodies and female sexuality does not only take the form of restraining. Male violence against women and the appropriation of

women's bodies for the gratification of male desires are central to many feminist theories of patriarchy, in particular those of the radical feminist school (Walby 3; see for example Brownmiller; MacKinnon; Dworkin). In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, too, the culture of shame and denial surrounding women's sexuality is coupled with a steady prevalence of male sexual pressure and violence. In this section, I explore the portrayal of sexual objectification and violence in Hobb's series.

In her study of the "rhetoric of sexual violence" in American literature, Sabine Sielke asserts that "talk about rape does not necessarily denote rape", emphasising instead the function of rape as "an insistent figure for other social, political and economic concerns and conflicts" (2). However, while it is undoubtedly true that narratives of rape relate in intricate ways to all manner of power structures and discourses, my contention here is that they first and foremost relate to the issue of *rape*. Representations of rape in art simultaneously reflect and influence the cultural understanding and interpretation of real rape (Bal 101; Tanner 10; Sielke 7)⁷, affecting "the definition of what rape is" (Higgins and Silver 1). Concurring with Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver, then, in their assertion that "the politics and aesthetics of rape are one" (1), I likewise share their ambition of "taking rape literally" (4).

Whether due to its actual prevalence in patriarchal society, or its particular force as a metaphor for various power relations, sexual violence is a theme which is frequently represented in literature and art (Stockton 2). As Tolmie (148-9) and Davis (10) testify, the fantasy genre is no exception. In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, too, rape is a recurrent theme, the reality or threat of it shaping the lives of numerous characters. The Duke of Chalced's daughter Chassim is raped by her father's advisor (*BoD* 244-6). Starling is gang raped by invading raiders, and then once again when captured by a group of soldiers (*AQ* 647;649). Serilla, Heart's Companion to the Jamaillian Satrap⁸, is handed over as a gift to a ship's captain, locked up in his cabin, and raped and beaten repeatedly for several days (*MS* 499-502), and Althea is drugged and raped by the pirate Kennit (*SoD* 542-5). Althea, moreover, also experiences an attempted rape (*MS* 702-4), as does Malta (*SoD* 275; 279). Alise Kincarron is raped by her husband (*DK* 132-3), the work thus subverting stereotypical conceptions of rape as "an encounter of total strangers in public parks" (Sielke 1); and depictions of male-on-male rape also occur in the series (*SoD* 486; *BoD* 247-8).

⁷ Despite her express focus on rape as a rhetorical figure, Sielke, too, admits the existence of such a connection.

⁸ The Satrap is the ruler of Jamaillia. His Heart's Companions are women sworn to his lifelong service as advisors—although, in reality, they often function as his concubines as well.

Higgins and Silver appropriates Beckett's classical question, asking: "What does it matter who is speaking?" (1), furthermore promptly providing an answer: in the representation of rape, "who is speaking may be *all* that matters" (1, emphasis in original). Rape in literature and art is traditionally "almost always framed by a masculine perspective premised on men's fantasies about female sexuality" (Higgins and Silver 2), or else rape is used as a plot device designed "to make an impact on the male characters' story arc", the female rape victims "cast as disposable casualties who exist only to affect the men" (Frankel 14). As Laura Tanner points out, even seemingly objective depictions of rape may be problematic:

The attempt to translate violence into narrative [...] very easily lapses into a choreography of bodily positions and angles of assault that serves as a transcription of the violator's story. In the case of rape, where a violator frequently coopts not only the victim's physical form but her power of speech, the external manifestations that make up a visual narrative of violence are anything but objective. To provide an 'external' perspective on rape is to represent the story that the violator has created (29).

In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, several strategies are used to avoid such an external, ostensibly "objective" perspective.

The first strategy can be seen in the case of Chassim. The story of Chassim's violation is told from the point of view of Selden, who attempts to intervene, but fails. However, while Selden witnesses the rapist's preparations, he is unconscious during the culmination of the act; the fact that a rape has really taken place is only confirmed afterwards by Chassim herself (*BoD* 244-6). Having Selden lose consciousness for the duration of the rape, Hobb denies readers the perspective of the onlooker which, as Tanner notes, so easily becomes the perspective of the violator (18). "[R]ape," Mieke Bal writes, "makes the victim invisible. It does that literally—first the perpetrator covers her—and figuratively—then the rape destroys her self-image, her subjectivity" (99-100). Recognising that an external depiction of the rape would render Chassim "invisible", Hobb elects to let the rape take place entirely outside the field of vision of the reader.

The second strategy at work in the representation of rape in Hobb's series is the use of extremely sparse, plainly worded descriptions. The imprisonment and repeated rapes of Serilla constitute one of the works' most horrific instances of sexual violence; yet the captain is described as raping her "not savagely, but matter-of-factly", hitting her "casually", and giving her as much attention as he gives "to the chamber pot or spittoon" (*MS* 500). No detailed account of the act is provided; only the tattered state of Serilla's clothes (*MS* 501) and the bruises on her face (*MS* 504) suggest the degree of violence involved. Chassim's

description of her own rape is similarly blunt: “He only raped me. Not even in a very imaginative way. Just plain old-fashioned choking, slapping and rape” (*BoD* 246). Portraying rape thus schematically, yet unambiguously, the work avoids presenting “a choreography of bodily positions” while leaving no room for doubt as to what has taken place. The lack of juicy details does not diminish the severity of the violations. Refusing to provide food for titillation, *The Realm of the Elderlings* instead emphasises that rape is severe enough even when not “very imaginative”.

Hobb’s third strategy corresponds to the one detected by Tanner in her analysis of Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, where rape is depicted by “attach[ing] the reader to the victim’s tortured body” (x). This is the strategy employed to narrate Althea’s story, as she is drugged and raped:

Somewhere, someone tugged at her body. She felt the rasp of cloth past her legs. No. She dragged her eyelids up and tried to find sight. His face was inches from her own but she could not make her eyes resolve his features. Then she felt his hand slide up her thigh. She cried out in protest as fingers probed her, and the hand went away. [...] The sudden weight on top of her drove the breath from her lungs. A hand clapped over her mouth. “Quiet, now. Quiet,” the dark voice in her ear warned her roughly. [...] She tried to push him off, she thought she had, but when she rolled over to crawl away, she heard a quiet laugh. Then he was on her back, pushing the blanket aside. [...] Her muscles had no strength. The more she tried to flee, the more her body collapsed. She made a sound, and the hand clapped over her mouth covered her nose as well and pulled her head back. It hurt. She could not breathe, and she was no longer certain where she was or what was happening. Needing to breathe took precedent over all else. She seized the wrist of that hand and wrestled it feebly. Sparks danced behind her eyes as he kneed her legs apart. He was hurting her, her head pulled back so far on her neck, but the pain was not as important as needing to breathe. His hand slipped until it covered only her mouth. She dragged in breath after breath through her nose, and then he thrust suddenly deep into her. She screamed without sound and bucked under him but could not evade him. (*SoD* 542-4)

In this case, Hobb does provide a lengthy and detailed account of the violation itself. Locating the point of view firmly inside the body of Althea, however, Hobb refuses to tell the violator’s story⁹. As “the necessary distance between the voyeur and the object of voyeuristic pleasure is collapsed” (Tanner 30), the reader shares Althea’s nightmarish disorientation and experiences the invasion of groping hands and the suffocating weight of the rapist’s body together with her. “Rape takes place on the inside,” Bal writes (100), therefore, it is only by narrating from the inside that the story of rape can be properly told. Moreover, as Tanner points out (29), the inside perspective allows Althea’s struggle to be depicted. Hearing her story from the inside, the reader is aware of her efforts to push her attacker away, her attempts

⁹ Interestingly, both Althea and Kennit, the rapist, are focal characters in the *Liveship Traders Trilogy*, and Hobb does depict Kennit’s lust for Althea preceding the rape as well as his sated contentment afterwards. For the rape itself, however, Hobb chooses Althea’s perspective.

to flee, and her silent screams, despite the helpless state in which Kennit's drugs have put her. As in Naylor's novel, furthermore, it is the rapist's body, not the victim's, which is "objectified" and "fragmented" (Tanner 29). While Kennit is reduced to a pair of hands, a few fingers, a blurry face, and a dark voice, Althea manages to retain her subjectivity despite his appropriation of her body and his fogging of her mind.

The Realm of the Elderlings does not only depict the immediate experience of rape; it also acknowledges and explores the long-term consequences for rape survivors, physical as well as psychological. "It changes how you see yourself; it changes what you can believe of other people. It changes everything," Selden, a victim of male-on-male rape, states (*BoD* 248). "Flesh rips when you are forced," says Chassim in her characteristically blunt way (*BoD* 249), reminding readers of the physical reality of rape, and Selden, following his rape, is "sick for days afterward", bleeding and feverish (*BoD* 248). For Althea, although she is physically relatively unscathed, her rape has psychological consequences; repeatedly reliving her violation in nightmares (*SoD* 739; 782) she cannot bear any sexual contact, even from her beloved Brashen (*SoD* 742). Her trauma only ends when magical intervention enables her to let go of the most painful aspects of her memory (*SoD* 783-4). Rape, Bal asserts, leaves the victim's self-image "temporarily narcotized, definitively changed, and often destroyed" (100). Such harm to an individual's subjectivity is depicted in the case of Serilla, who reacts to her prolonged sexual torture with utter rejection of her own self:

She could no longer be Serilla. [...] She despised Serilla. Serilla was too weak to fight off this man. Serilla had been too foolishly proud to accept the Satrap's offer to bed him instead of the Chalcedean. Serilla was too cowardly to plot how to kill the captain, or even how to kill herself. [...] She detached herself from Serilla, and shared the world's contempt for her (*MS* 502)

Unable to bear the thought of the violence that has been done to her, Serilla directs the pain and hatred, for which she has no other outlet, inwards, blaming her rape and torment on her own weakness.

However, while rape in *The Realm of the Elderlings* leaves life-long scars and may damage a person beyond repair, the series also acknowledges the possibility of survival and growth. In the direct aftermath of her rape, despairingly seeking death, Althea instead finds the essence of her beloved liveship¹⁰ Vivacia suppressed through magical means deep inside the subconscious of the ship. Appalled at Vivacia's anguished existence, Althea manages to free her from her magical imprisonment, and the two promise each other mutual support in

¹⁰ A sentient ship.

their efforts to go on living (*SoD* 554). In Chassim's case, her history of rape and abuse in her several forced marriages inspires her attempt to stir up revolution among Chalced's oppressed women (*CoD* 371-3); and Serilla, when released back to the Satrap, draws strength from her anger and hatred for him and uses it to carve out an independent future for herself (*MS* 507). Thus, while rape in Hobb's series will leave a person forever changed, it will not necessarily leave her (or him) forever crushed.

Numerous feminist writers on rape have pointed to the problem of "rape myths", "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women" (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 134). In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, such myths are repeatedly targeted and discredited. "I have heard it said [...] that rape bothers only virgins and wives," Starling, known for her liberal attitude towards sex, tells her friend Fitz. "I thought perhaps you felt that to one such as I, it was no more than my due" (*AQ* 650). Letting Fitz react with shock and outrage at her assumption, *The Realm of The Elderlings* emphatically rejects any notion that promiscuous women somehow "invite" rape or "deserve" to be raped. The series also targets rape myths by having them uttered by unsympathetic characters. The Satrap tells Serilla that rape: "is what men naturally do to women [...] Rape is nothing but an idea women created, to pretend that a man can steal what you have an infinite supply of. You took no permanent harm from it" (*MS* 506); and Kennit, confronted by his magical advisor about his violation of Althea, denies the charge of rape: "She likes me. She said I was courteous and a gentleman. [...] She only resisted because she's not a whore" (*SoD* 546). Juxtaposing these ideas, so explicitly worded, with detailed depictions of the pain and suffering of the rape victims, *The Realm of the Elderlings* vehemently distances itself from such myths, declaring them absurd as well as hateful.

Feminist theory emphasises an understanding of rape and other forms of sexual violence as a structural feature of the patriarchal system, rather than as deviant acts perpetrated by a few deranged individuals (Walby 128-9). Such an understanding is evident in Hobb's series, too. As Althea wishes to find work as a sailor, she is advised against it because of the risks to herself:

Ship out alone [...], and you'd better choose early which shipmates you want to roll. If you're lucky, they'll be possessive enough to keep the others off you. If you're not lucky, they'll turn a nice profit from your services before you reach the next port. And most mates and captains will turn a blind eye to what goes on, to keep order on the ship. That's if they don't claim your services for themselves (*SoM* 260)

Here, the risk of sexual violence functions as a deterrent. Noting that sexual harassment in the workplace has been found to be most rampant within occupations traditionally held by men, Walby suggests that it may be used quite deliberately as a tool to discourage women from seeking traditionally male lines of work. In this way, the economical patriarchal structure is upheld by way of the sexual (52). When Althea goes to sea anyway, albeit in male disguise, she is warned yet again: “Did these two-legged animals you crew with suspect for one moment that you were a woman, they'd use you, one and all [...] And they would see it that by your being here you had expected and consented to such use” (*SoM* 382). In the patriarchal system as depicted by Hobb, women who stray outside the perceived bounds of acceptable feminine behaviour may be subjected to sexual violence as a “just” punishment for their transgressions—a point noted by Susan Brownmiller (284-6) as well as by Diana Scully and Joseph Marolla (256). Moreover, as the example of Althea further shows, the series also endorses another feminist claim: women do not have to be raped in order to be intimidated by rape; the fact that some men rape is sufficient to keep all women in a state of fear (Walby 135). In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, thus, sexual violence is not an isolated phenomenon but one aspect of the patriarchal system, and, furthermore, a tool with which the system is maintained.

Walby argues for a conception of male violence against women as a continuum (128). “Milder” forms of objectification, such as sexist language or groping, are thus connected with more “serious” types of violence, such as rape. Such an understanding is reflected in *The Realm of the Elderlings*. Sexual objectification of women in the series exists in a myriad of forms, and their interrelatedness is stressed. As Malta finds herself stuck on a Chalcedean ship with nothing more than the dubious protection of the Satrap to shield her from certain gang rape and probable murder, the sailors’ objectifying gazes and knowing grins serve as a constant reminder of her danger (*SoD* 397-8); and the Satrap himself, while too physically weak to present a serious threat, terrorises first Serilla and later Malta with his frequent sexual suggestions and pawing of their bodies (*MS* 101-2; *SoD* 394).

Adding complexity to the issue, moreover, *The Realm of the Elderlings* recognises that the distinction between rape and not-rape is not always clear-cut. Brownmiller writes:

A case of rape and a case of unpleasant but not quite criminal sexual extortion in which a passive, egoless woman succumbs because it never occurred to her that she might, with effort, repel the advance [...] flow from the same oppressive ideology,

and the demarcation line between the two is far from clear (401)

Several examples of such “not quite criminal” but nevertheless undesired sexual acts can be found in Hobb’s series. Cerise’s friend’s husband, who has previously “done no more than stroke [her] buttocks as [she] passed him, or casually brush [her] breast with the back of his hand as he reached past [her], as if it were by accident” (“The Inheritance” 286-7) tiptoes to Cerise’s bed in the night and crawls in beside her when she stays overnight at their house. Cerise does not protest against his groping; instead, she grits her teeth and pretends to be asleep: “Let him touch me. If I refused to wake, surely he would leave me alone” (287); she is only saved from further intrusion by the intervention of her magical pendant. Similarly hard to determine is the nature of Althea’s first intercourse, at the age of fourteen. “[I]t wasn’t rape,” Althea insists. “He didn’t force me. I didn’t know a thing about it, but I was sure I was in love” (*SoM* 499). Still, the narrative makes clear that Althea would have cut short the procedure had it “occurred to her that she might” (Brownmiller 401); as she tells her sister, “I was frightened, I thought I wanted him to do it and then I knew I didn’t, but I didn’t know how to make him stop” (*SoD* 544). Yet another version of “unpleasant but not quite criminal” sexual conduct is the practice of badgering a person for sex. This is depicted in the relationship of the two young dragon keepers Tats and Thymara. When Thymara expresses her reluctance to take their budding love affair beyond kisses and touches, Tats reacts with annoyance and insult. Exclaiming “[t]hen I don’t see how we can go on at all” (*DH* 408), he accuses her of “teasing” him and “making a fool of” him (*DH* 409). Tats thus comes to represent the notion that a woman who has shown interest in man “owes” him sex. Thymara is not charmed by his attitude. Depicting her dogged resistance to his accusations and nagging, *The Realm of the Elderlings* denies the validity of such an idea. Including examples such as Cerise’s, Althea’s, and Thymara’s, Hobb’s series depicts male appropriation of women’s bodies as a casual, routine occurrence within patriarchy, which, moreover, is to be understood as a violation even if not accompanied by violence.

In its exploration of patriarchy, *The Realm of the Elderlings* conveys an understanding of sexual violence as a widespread, common and complex phenomenon. It is simultaneously an expression of patriarchy and a means by which patriarchy is maintained; and although it occurs in various forms, these are all interrelated. Sharon Stockton, in her study of the Western rape narrative, writes: “One of the most powerful efforts towards dismantling the traditional forms of the rape story has been the reinsertion of the woman’s voice into the narrative” (184). Consistently portraying sexual violence from the perspective of the victim,

Hobb's series partakes of that dismantling, joining those speculative fiction works which, as Davis writes, "give rape survivors a voice and create spaces where rape can be examined" (11).

III. Marriage is Not About Love Alone

Marriage as a Patriarchal Structure

In Western popular culture, marriage as a concept is intimately intertwined with notions of romantic love. It is a core element of the "happily ever after", not just in fairy tales and romance, although these are the genres in which this tendency is perhaps most marked¹¹, but in the bulk of Western canonical literature as well. Marriage means closure, resolution.

Feminist discourse, meanwhile, commonly holds forth marriage as a crucial patriarchal structure, simultaneously a tool for sexual and for economical control. Walby asserts that "women get a raw deal in marriage" (84) and concludes that marriage "is only alright for women because the alternatives are worse" (88). Other writers go further. Christine Delphy regards marriage as "a relationship of slavery" within which the wife's labour is exploited by the husband ("The Main Enemy" 71), declaring this relationship "the main oppression of women" (74); and Rubin, following Lévi-Strauss, understands marriage as basically an exchange of women between men (173), furthermore positing this exchange system as the basis of binary gender roles (178).

Fantasy has close affinities with both fairy tales and romance, historically as well as thematically and in terms of plot structure (Ashley 330-3; Attebery "Romance" 820-1). These ties exert a certain influence over the genre in terms of ideology, too; as Attebery notes, the borrowing of forms and motifs often also entails the borrowing of world view ("Gender" 51-2). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect fantasy to harbour a conception of marriage similar to those two genres. This is indeed often the case; Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, closes with no less than three marriages. *The Realm of the Elderlings* is certainly not free from examples of romantic marriage. For the long-suffering Fitz, closure and contentment are finally achieved through marriage to his childhood sweetheart Molly (*FF* 912)¹². Other romantic marriages also occur, several of them as closing gestures.

11 Tellingly, in Vladimir Propp's seminal *Morphology of the Folktale*, the closing function of the folktale scheme is given the definition "wedding", despite the fact that some of the subtypes of the function do not in fact include weddings (57).

12 In the subsequent *Fitz and the Fool Trilogy*, Fitz is snatched once more from his "happily ever after"; however, his marriage nevertheless provides the closure of the *Tawny Man Trilogy*.

However, alongside its depictions of “happy end”-marriages, *The Realm of the Elderlings* also pays considerable attention to less savoury versions and aspects of marriage, especially as regards women’s position in relation to it. In this section, I will investigate three versions of not-so-romantic marriages as depicted in Hobb’s series: forced marriages, marriages of convenience, and marriages which, despite being based in love or desire, are nevertheless deeply hierarchical. In Hobb’s treatment of these marriages, feminist influences are clearly discernible, with marriage depicted as a major site of patriarchal oppression.

The practice of forced arranged marriage is perhaps the most glaringly oppressive form of marriage. While forced marriage is not the general norm in the cultures most closely portrayed in *The Realm of the Elderlings*, it does occur among royalty and the upper classes as part of diplomatic or trade settlements. In these agreements, struck between the parents of the prospective spouses, an alliance between two families or nations is sealed through the marriage bond of two of their children, the alliance thus perpetuated through kinship.

In her depictions of forced marriage, Hobb explores the perspectives of the promised youths by letting the characters themselves voice their anxieties and tribulations, often in very direct terms. Thus, fourteen-year-old Prince Dutiful of the Six Duchies, engaged to a Narcheska¹³ of the neighbouring Out Islands as the final seal to a peace treaty, is frank about his feelings on the matter: “There is something rather dreadful about meeting the girl you will marry when you know that your own preferences have absolutely no bearing on the situation” (*FE* 639). Although common consensus in the Six Duchies holds that “a prince’s hand [can’t] be wasted on something as foolish as his own choice” (*AA* 252), Dutiful here clearly subscribes to the ideal of the romantic marriage. As Dutiful conceives it, marriage *ought* to have some connection to his “own preferences”. His prospective bride, the Narcheska Elliania, is similarly direct:

I don't want to marry that prince. [...] He'll make me fat with babies, and they'll all be pale and cold as ice wraiths. Please, Peottre, take me home. I don't want to have to live in this great cold cave. I don't want that boy to do the thing to me that makes babies.' (*GF* 33)

Here, twelve-year-old Elliania demonstrates a keen awareness of the terms of the agreement. It is her body and its reproductive function which is the commodity in this transaction—the trade concerns the right to make her “fat with babies”. It should be noted that Elliania’s family are coerced into the affair (*FF* 543). As will be further discussed in section 3.i, Out Islands culture is matriarchal, and forced marriage is an entirely foreign concept to it. Elliania’s uncle

13 A Narcheska is a woman standing to inherit the position of matriarch in an Out Islands clan

Peottré, acting as her guardian in her mother's absence, hopes to be able to back out of the marriage agreement, and he fervently assures Elliania that she will never be subjected to sex against her will (*GF* 34). Nevertheless, Elliania interprets the agreement correctly as far as it is understood in the patriarchal Six Duchies.

One generation earlier, with the example of Dutiful's parents, Hobb reduces arranged marriage to its barest bones as King-in-Waiting Verity is wed by proxy to princess Kettricken of the neighbouring Mountain Kingdom. Having had his courtship performed by his younger brother, Verity is not even present at his own wedding; the couple has already been married for a month before they first meet (*AA* 310). Here, there is not even the slightest pretence of romance; Hobb makes perfectly clear that the two persons being wed are not considered as anything else than valuable trade goods. "A princess must endure being bartered away like a cow", as Kettricken's aunt puts it (*AA* 372).

In passages such as these, Hobb expresses a critique of forced marriage which is not subtle and not ambiguous. Nor is it particularly radical; the sentiments voiced by characters such as Dutiful and Elliania are nowhere at odds with contemporary mainstream opinion in the Western world. Similar examples of such blunt statements can be found in other parts of the work as well. "You've sold me," Malta tells her mother and grandmother, when she finds out that she risks being forcibly engaged in order to settle a debt. "You've sold me to a monster, to pay off a ship. So I can be dragged off to some swampy tree-camp to grow warts and make babies while you all get rich off new trade contracts with the Khuprus family" (*SoM* 769). Likewise, Fitz—who has himself narrowly escaped forced marriage in his youth—feels as if he is "delivering [Dutiful] to his execution" when bringing him home to his betrothal, (*FE* 639). This type of utterances are clear examples of the rhetorical strategy described by Tolmie in her study, with political standpoints declared through explicit commentary or very plain symbolism (151). Larsson writes: "The use of marriage as a vital part of various power intrigues both concurs with our more or less diffuse perceptions of the historical meanings of the institution of matrimony, and, at the same time, conflicts with our modern ideals of true love and (some kind of) gender equality" (19). To be sure, forced marriage is far from extinct in the contemporary world—the UNICEF estimates that 10 million minor girls are forced into marriage yearly ("Not a Single Girl"). Nevertheless, for most of Hobb's readers in her native USA and other Western countries, forced arranged marriage as described in her fiction is probably more evocative of a historical past than of contemporary child marriage practices, and the tension, as described by Larsson, between a conception of history and modern Western ideals is plainly manifested in the quoted utterances by Hobb's characters.

However, while Hobb lets the victims of forced marriage express their discontent in highly explicit ways, she also presents other perspectives, giving voice, as well, to those responsible for the wedding arrangements. Verity, his father King Shrewd argues, must marry in order to “put heart into the people” in a time of war and hardship (AA 301). Moreover, the type of alliance a royal marriage can buy is necessary in order to secure the resources that the country desperately needs; this, Shrewd reasons, is more important than the preferences of two individuals. “Soft hands and a sweet scent will not build your warships, Verity”, he tells his son (AA 303). Queen Kettricken, Dutiful’s mother, reasons similarly: in order to secure “peace in her lifetime” (FE 241), her son must marry a woman from the Out Islands. In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, these are real and important concerns, and the characters who voice them are characters whose judgement the reader is usually prone to trust. This is especially true of Kettricken. Her native Mountain Kingdom tradition dictates that the ruler should always be prepared to act as a sacrifice for his or her people, a notion which, as Deszcz-Tryhubczak notes, is largely idealised by the work (“Sacrifice” 315-6). By promising her son in marriage, Kettricken simply holds him to her own high ideals. Indeed, this alternative perspective on Dutiful’s marriage arrangement can be readily discerned in Deszcz-Tryhubczak’s comment on the event. “[B]y arranging a marriage of her son to a princess from a land that so far has been hostile to the Six Duchies, Kettricken promotes cooperation and negotiation that lead to the political and economic stability of both nations” Deszcz-Tryhubczak writes (327), nowhere indicating that Dutiful’s forced engagement might be understood as oppressive. By presenting the perspectives and arguments of all parties involved, Hobb complicates the picture of forced marriage far beyond contemporary mainstream sentiments. While *The Realm of the Elderlings* is certainly keen to lay bare the oppressive mechanisms of forced marriage, it nevertheless recognises its complexity, acknowledging that cultural practices, however harmful, can still be rationalised within the context in which they exist.

Hobb’s exploration of the mechanisms and consequences of forced marriage is somewhat undermined, though, by her insistence on happy endings for all of the above couples. Elliott commends Hobb for her realistic treatment of political marriages, claiming that it diverges from the conventions of genre fantasy where typically “even politically expedient marriages find themselves based on love” (“Manifestations” 21). However, while *The Realm of the Elderlings* certainly depicts marriages arranged for purely political reasons, and while the objects of these arrangements are initially reluctant, affection very conveniently tends to develop. Thus, Kettricken and Verity gradually develop a profound love for one

another; Malta eventually becomes as madly infatuated with her fiancé as he already is with her; and Dutiful and Elliania ultimately choose each other of their own accord (*FF* 547). As Pamela Freeman writes regarding a similar situation in Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* series, “[f]or eucatastrophe¹⁴, we must have, not politically expedient marriage, but love” (24); and Hobb, despite her attempt to complicate the notion of marriage, does not in these cases succeed to free herself from genre conventions and their demand for romance.

While forced marriage is the most obviously oppressive mode of marriage found in Hobb's fiction, it is not the only one, nor perhaps the most interesting in terms of feminist thought. Forced marriage, as I wrote above, is likely to be perceived by most of Hobb's readers as archaic or exotic. A focus on such practices may serve to distance the reader from the fictional world rather than supplying useful insights into patriarchal structures and mechanisms. More pertinent to an understanding of contemporary patriarchy, however, are the depictions in *The Realm of the Elderlings* of marriages entered not because of coercion, but for the sake of economic security.

As Walby points out, although the family and household are often major sites for the exploitation of women, “marriage is in the immediate material interests of most women” (87). “Those who marry are not suffering from false consciousness and an ignorance of their real interests,” Walby argues, “but are acting in their own best interests, given restricted options” (88). Such a material perspective on marriage is present in several of Hobb's depictions. When Mirrifin's apprenticeship fails due to the death of her mistress, she succinctly lists the restricted options available to her. She cannot “flee back to her father's house, for her brothers [have] filled it with wives and children” (“Words Like Coins” 102). Without a profession of her own, she can only find a reliable living as a dependant on a man, either her father or her husband; thus, the best remaining option for Mirrifin is to get married. The terms of the marriage into which she enters are clear: “Don't have to be pretty, just willing to work hard, and put up with a man who's nice enough but not too bright” (102). At least, Mirrifin's husband is “nice enough”, and not having expected romance, Mirrifin is happy with her married life (102). Aubretia Lantis suffers a harsher fate; having lost all of her inherited fortune to a faithless lover, she marries a “hard-handed, flinty-hearted man” for the sole purpose of having “a place to rest her head at night”, her husband wanting her “solely to have someone to tend his squalling son and keep his house in order after his first wife died of his ill treatment” (“The Inheritance” 292). “[T]he marriage contract,” Delphy writes, “is in fact a

¹⁴ “Eucatastrophe”, a term coined by Tolkien, denotes that “sudden joyous turn” which, according to Tolkien, marks the end of any true fantasy work (75).

work contract” (“Continuities” 95). In Hobb’s depictions of convenience marriages, such ideas are very much in evidence. For Mirrifin and Aubretia, marriage has nothing to do with love; as in Delphy’s writings, it is purely an arrangement through which the woman sells her labour and her body to a man in exchange for basic maintenance.

The idea of marriage as a contract, however, is most plainly articulated in the depiction of the two young Bingtowners Alise and Hest. Hest Finbok, a homosexual man in a homophobic society, needs a wife to keep up appearances, and having failed to convince Alise with more conventional courtship tactics, he bluntly tells her the terms of his marriage offer (crucially omitting, however, the fact of his sexual orientation):

[A]ccording to my parents, I must court and wed a woman if I am to have children to follow me. I must have a wife who will keep track of our social duties, entertain lavishly when it is required, and move easily within Bingtown society. [...] I [need] someone capable of running my household without my constant attention. A woman who would not feel neglected if left alone for an evening, or even for months when business forces me to travel (*DK* 79-80).

In exchange for performing the role of wife, Alise is offered a leisurely life in the wealthy Finbok household, with sufficient time and financial means to pursue the dragon scholarship which is her fervent passion (81). For Alise, a woman from the threadbare end of Bingtown high society, Hest’s “outrageous” (81) offer, which “to another woman [...] might have seemed insult most foul” (81), appears favourable. Her options for the future, as far as she understands them, are restricted to “marriage or spinsterhood” (262), and having little hope for romantic marriage, she accepts Hest’s proposal, the couple sealing their deal with a handshake (82).

Describing Hest’s and Alise’s marriage agreement, Hobb makes explicit and open the contractual dimension of marriage which is usually left implicit and un-commented. She further emphasises this dimension through her depiction of the Bingtown wedding ceremony, which, in this nation of traders, consists of the reading aloud and signing of the wedding contract drawn up by the families of the couple (*DK* 100). “Marriage is not about love alone,” as another Bingtowners puts it (*MS* 174), and as Hobb reminds us, any marriage is a juridically binding contract, requiring written terms and witnesses, and the legal aspect of marriage is in itself singularly un-romantic.

As such, every marriage can be seen as a business transaction, and in *The Realm of the Elderlings*, marriage is repeatedly described in the language of trade, as we have already seen in relation to forced marriage. Alise, too, uses such terms about Hest’s marriage proposal: “You would buy me, in the hopes of a simpler life for yourself. You would buy me, with

scrolls and time for scholarship” (*DK* 81). If marriage is the selling and buying of bodies, it is not so very different from prostitution—a fact which is also repeatedly noted in Hobb’s work. “So I should whore myself out to the highest bidder, so long as he’ll call me wife and offer a good bride price?” a furious Althea asks Kyle, following his suggestion that she behave more ladylike in order to secure a good marriage for herself (*SoM* 217). On the other side of the divide, the prostitute Etta also notes the similarity. “[W]ith the gold you pay Bettel¹⁵, I could rent a small house for us,” she tells her most frequent customer. “I would keep it tidy and clean. It would always be there for you to come home to, and I would always be ready and clean for you. I vow there would never be the smell of another man upon me” (*SoM* 103). Although Etta does not explicitly propose marriage, the arrangement she describes is little different from that between many a wife and husband in *The Realm of the Elderlings*.

During their wedding, Alise and Hest take turns reading and signing each of the terms of their wedding contract (*DK* 102), seemingly the equal parties of a carefully negotiated business transaction. But a prostitute is not equal to and independent of her customer, however much liberal debaters would want it to be so; a maidservant is certainly not the equal of her employer; and in Bingtown, neither is the wife equal to and independent of her husband, however detailed their wedding contract is. Having initially drawn the picture of Alise’s and Hest’s marriage as an agreement between equals, Hobb quickly unmask this as an illusion. Once married, Hest is none too eager to honour his part of the contract, and in her attempts to assert their bargain, Alise is doubly disadvantaged: firstly, by her economic dependency on her husband, and secondly, by her position as a woman. Hest strongly expresses his displeasure with Alise’s expenses (*DK* 132), and threatens to withhold his promise of a possibility to travel, citing propriety (*DK* 221); for in patriarchal Bingtown, the actions of a wife might stain her husband’s reputation, and a husband holds the power to grant or deny his wife permission. Moreover, a husband also holds the right to his wife’s body. While the married life of the Finboks is completely devoid of passion or lust, Hest nevertheless reserves to himself the right to determine when and how Alise will perform the “wifely [duty]” (*DK* 217) of trying to become pregnant with his heir. As noted in the previous section, Hobb here raises the issue of marital rape, a type of sexual assault which has historically often gone unrecognised by many of the world’s justice systems (Walby 128). Having “bought” her, Hest virtually owns Alise, and may use her however he likes. The reality of the Finbok marriage thus stands in sharp contrast to the implicit equality of the

15 The keeper of the brothel in which Etta works

negotiations preceding it. “It was a stupid bargain,” Alise later concedes (*DH* 125), acknowledging that her marriage is “a sham” and “a travesty” (*DK* 542). Utterly devoid of love, as it is, the story of the Finbok marriage can perhaps be read as a cautionary tale, the moral being that a lifelong commitment to another person should be based on something deeper than economy or convenience. Read as such, it is not a feminist statement, but rather a defence of the ideal of romantic marriage.

However, *The Realm of the Elderlings* offers further examples of unequal marriages, even when based in passion or love. The relationship between Kyle and his wife Keffria is simultaneously patriarchal and loving. Kyle, portrayed as violent, arrogant, and ignorant, is one of the least sympathetic characters in the series; yet, his affection for his wife appears to be genuine. “She’s a woman that any man would be proud to claim,” he declares (*SoM* 45). Their sexual life is described as gentle and passionate (*SoM* 171; 342), and while Kyle is abusive of both his sister-in-law, his oldest son, and the family liveship Vivacia, he is never depicted as hard-handed towards Keffria. Nevertheless, their marriage is far from equal. Kyle reserves to himself the last word in all decisions concerning family business and the couple’s children. If Keffria’s opinions are taken into regard, it is because Kyle has “let her have her way” (*SoM* 175); Kyle has the power to stop his wife “with a gesture” (*SoM* 210); and Keffria’s property, in Kyle’s opinion, automatically belongs to him as well (*SoM* 208). With the depiction of Kyle and Keffria, Hobb portrays a more insidious version of patriarchal oppression; romance, she demonstrates, is not an antidote to patriarchy. Moreover, she describes how discourses of romance and of gender roles can lead women to become complicit in their own oppression. Keffria takes comfort in “the solid reality of [Kyle’s] muscle and strength” (*SoM* 342) and relies on him “to take care of her and keep her safe and defend their door from all troubles and worries” (*SoM* 175). For this promised security, she is willing to yield him her deference.

In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, Hobb questions the notion of romantic marriage, so prevalent in the high fantasy genre, its generic predecessors, and Western popular culture at large, by presenting a range of marriage practises and customs which are far from romantic. Recalling feminist theory, marriage is repeatedly associated in the series with the trade of humans, married women being variously compared to livestock, commodities, prostitutes, and servants. However, Hobb does not condemn the practice of marriage in its entirety; the series also features numerous examples of romantic marriages depicted in a very positive light. In these examples of “good” marriages, Hobb generally emphasises economic and intellectual equality, mutual respect, and companionship. In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, while many

features of marriage are depicted as highly problematic, it is not understood as patriarchal *per se*.

3. Patriarchy Undermined

In the previous chapter I have demonstrated how *The Realm of the Elderlings* depicts specific patriarchal structures, exploring the mechanisms by which they operate and pointing to their harmful effects. However, Hobb's series also scrutinises the *system* of patriarchy as such. In this chapter, I discuss three ways in which *The Realm of the Elderlings* exposes the contingency of the patriarchal system, putting its basic premises in question. In the first section, I discuss cultural differences of gender roles as depicted in Hobb's storyworld; in the second section, I turn to a discussion of patriarchy as historically variable; and finally, in the third section, I consider examples of gender performativity in the work, pointing to passages where Hobb appears to subvert and undermine the notion of binary gender itself.

I. The Customs of Society Dictate Strongly to Us All

Culturally Divergent Gender Roles

As both Walby (93) and Rubin (178) note, although every known real-world culture makes some kind of binary distinction between the “masculine” and the “feminine”, the actual traits and tasks associated with each vary to a considerable degree. Gender roles, these authors argue, can therefore not be understood as biologically given, but are assigned and negotiated within a cultural context, and contingent upon that context. Such is the situation in Hobb's *The Realm of the Elderlings*, too. Its storyworld consists of a large number of different nations and ethnicities, and during the course of the series, their various cultures are explored and compared from a multitude of angles, with considerable attention given to their different conceptions of gender roles and gender politics. For in *The Realm of the Elderlings*, masculinity and femininity are not constants that follow naturally from biological sex—although they may appear so to its characters—but rather cultural constructs, subject to substantial variation; and patriarchy, while coming in many shapes and sizes, is not the only possible mode of sexual organisation. In this section, I will discuss the various cultural conceptions of gender present in Hobb's series, showing how these are contrasted and put under scrutiny within the work in ways which emphasise the cultural contingency of gender. But I will also point to contradictory tendencies, noting the essentialist impulses which exist alongside, and sometimes undermine, the series' generally constructionist take on gender

roles.

The characters of *The Realm of the Elderlings* are not unaware that differences of gender roles and gender politics exist in their world. Serilla from heavily patriarchal Jamailia admires the relative independence of Bingtown women (*SoD* 283), whereas Bingtown woman Althea, in her turn, looks enviously to the Six Duchies where “they don’t care if you’re a man or a woman, so long as you can do the work” (*SoM* 611). When Althea’s niece Malta remarks of a foreign woman that she “dresses and acts like a man”, Althea explains: “Jek is from the Six Duchies or one of those barbarian lands. That is just how women behave up there” (*MS* 280). Behaviour which strikes Malta as unnatural is, to the more cosmopolitan Althea, simply a matter of differing customs (though, notably, barbarian).

As a cautionary example of patriarchy at its worst, *The Realm of the Elderlings* holds out the nation of Chalced. Although hardly a match for Mordor, Chalced, with its widespread use of slavery, its warlike attitude, its traditional enmity of dragons, and its tyrannical madman of a ruler, is in many ways construed as the Land of Evil in Hobb’s series, and its general rottenness is reflected, also, in its abysmal treatment of women. In Chalced, women are regarded as “little more than cattle” (*MS* 277). To die without an heir-son is the direst fate a Chalcedean man can imagine, but daughters are regarded as “useless” (*CoD* 15) except in terms of the alliances that can be secured by marrying them off. The private and the public patriarchal modes of control are both in evidence: while genteel women are isolated from all men except their fathers and husbands (*BoD* 498-9), women who do not “belong” to a particular man are regarded as public property and are liable to be raped by anyone at any time: “in Chalced, no man’s woman is every man’s woman” (*SoD* 173). Domestic violence is routine, and a man may tell of his beating his insubordinate wife near to death without anyone batting an eyelid (*CoD* 372-4).

Compared to this horrific display of woman-hating, the more moderate versions of patriarchy in other parts of the storyworld might appear quite innocent. This, of course, is the danger of the device; constructing such a glaringly inflated version of patriarchy and placing it in Chalced, Hobb certainly conveys that patriarchal ideology is an evil, but she also risks relegating it to the domain of the barbaric Other, disassociating it from the here-and-now and rendering it irrelevant except as a looming foreign bogeyman. So, indeed, is it sometimes understood in the series. Wintrow Vestrit smugly contrasts the situation in Chalced, where being a woman is “but little better than to be a slave”, with the culture of his native Bingtown where “we used to take pride in what our women could do” (*SoM* 286), and as will be further

discussed in the next section, the development in Bingtown towards a more private form of patriarchy is routinely explained as the effect of Chalcedean influence. However, Hobb is not blind to more subtle expressions of patriarchy, nor does her series overlook the existence of patriarchal oppression even in cultures which are formally gender-equal. “[W]ill you pretend to be surprised, and claim that this is not the way of your kind?” Chassim of Chalced disdainfully asks Selden from Bingtown, after he has unsuccessfully tried to protect her from her rapist. “Among my people, rape is not condoned,” he explains, earning the reply: “No? But I am sure it still happens all the same”, and as Selden has to admit, it does (*BoD* 246).

Although *The Realm of the Elderlings* depicts a wide range of different nations and cultures, the chief parts of the series are set either in the kingdom of the Six Duchies or in the area surrounding the city-state Bingtown. Both of these nations are often described by characters of the work as comparatively gender-equal. However, while less rigidly oppressive than their neighbours Chalced or Jamaillia, both Bingtown and Six Duchies culture display clearly patriarchal traits. Bingtown, at the time in which most of the series is set, is undergoing a development toward a more private and more restrictive version of patriarchy, with the possibilities for female independence and agency celebrated by Serilla and Wintrow gradually being eroded. This development will be discussed in detail in section 3.ii. In the Six Duchies, meanwhile, private patriarchy is certainly less marked than in Bingtown. A wide range of occupations are available to women, including soldier (e.g. *RA* 564), hunter (*FE* 319), or professional assassin (*GF* 476). Titles and properties, moreover, are inherited by the oldest child regardless of sex (*AA* 307). Nevertheless, the Bingtown understanding of the Duchies as a place where “they don’t care if you’re a man or a woman” (*SoM* 611) does not quite stand to scrutiny; as Elliott points out, even the overtly gender-equal Six Duchies is not free from patriarchal tendencies (“Manifestations” 25-6). While somewhat bendable, traditional gender roles still largely dominate; freelance fighter Jek may be from the Six Duchies, but her masculine behaviour and attire appear remarkable even to her compatriots (*GF* 310-11). Upper-class women, we are told, are supposed to be “pretty and ornamental” (*AA* 250); girl children are expected to enjoy dolls and embroidery (*FE* 639); the royal keep is populated by stable boys and washing maids rather than the other way around; and despite the fact that soldiers are not rarely female, soldiers are often collectively referred to as “men” (e.g. *GF* 671). In other spheres, too, patriarchy is in evidence. “[B]eing female and traveling alone” is associated with danger (“Blue Boots” 10), and while women are not necessarily confined to the home, private patriarchal control is nevertheless the norm in the sphere of

sexuality. With the Six Duchies, *The Realm of the Elderlings* thus portrays patriarchy in one of its subtler manifestations. The risk of such a depiction is that the deep-lying patriarchal structure of the depicted society might be obscured by the illusion of “equal opportunity” on the surface level—indeed, Katavić understands the Six Duchies as a nation “entirely governed and ruled by women” (25), a claim which I find somewhat absurd, seeing that, as Elliott points out, “the majority of those in power in the Six Duchies at any given time are male” (“Manifestations” 26). Elliott, reading the discrepancy between avowed equality and “*de facto* patriarchy” in the Six Duchies as routine stereotyping on the part of Hobb, considers it “one of the weaker points of her literary construction” (“Manifestations” 26). Elliott’s complaint is certainly not invalid; as will be further discussed below, the rhetoric of *The Realm of the Elderlings* sometimes appears to reinforce the very same sexist structures which it otherwise criticises. On the other hand, the insidious version of patriarchy found in the Six Duchies is more likely to be resonant with the experience of many of the series’ readers than, for example, the glaring excesses of the Chalcedean system. The example of the Six Duchies thus serves as a reminder that patriarchy can persist despite formal equality.

With the different nations of Chalced, Jamailia, Bingtown, and the Six Duchies, *The Realm of the Elderlings* presents an array of systems in which patriarchal structures dominate, depicting patriarchy as variable in both form and degree. But the series also contains examples of cultures where gender relations diverge from the patriarchal pattern. Deszcz-Tryhubczak suggests as one such example the Mountain Kingdom, pointing to the character Kettricken and her reactions to the patriarchal norms of the Six Duchies as she arrives to be its queen (326). While, I would argue, the gender politics of the Mountain Kingdom are not described in enough detail in the work for any definitive claims to be made, the restricted role offered to Kettricken as queen of the Six Duchies clearly chafes at her (RA 118-20). Mountain Kingdom culture apparently does not endorse the ideal of passive genteel femininity which predominates in the Duchies. However, the most detailed description of a non-patriarchal culture in the series is that of the Out Islands.

With its portrait of Out Islands culture, *The Realm of the Elderlings* partakes in a long-standing feminist tradition of envisioning matriarchy—a tradition which, as Tolmie notes, is discernible within feminist fantasy works too, as an alternative to the discourse of female exceptionalism (152-3). The Out Islands is a clan society where land and other wealth is owned by women and inherited matrilineally (GF 89). Upon marriage, husbands move to the households of their wives or visit them there; women do not normally leave their maternal

clan lands (*FF* 260). Children belong to their mothers' clans, and fathers wield relatively little influence over them. Hobb is keen to emphasise that in the Out Islands, contrary to real-world examples of matrilineal or matrilocal societies (Gough 53), women truly hold supreme power. Women do not only nominally own the land; they wield absolute control over it. The matriarchal clan heads regulate the farming of the clan lands (*FF* 260) and women control the labour of their men for as long as they dwell in their mothershouse (*FF* 234). Indeed, the women of a clan regulate with absolute authority who may walk on the ground of their land (*FF* 226), and men who do not follow the "mothers' law" (*GF* 322) might find themselves banished from their clan lands (or, indeed, from all land) (*FF* 188; *FF* 208). In the sphere of sexuality, too, women are in control. While monogamous marriage does exist, an adult woman is free to have short or long term sexual relations outside of wedlock (*FF* 277), and marriage itself is "binding only so long as *the woman wishes to be bound by it*" (*FF* 234, emphasis mine). A wife, thus, can divorce her husband at any time and without any obstacles, whereas no means of divorce are available to a husband without his wife's consent. The power of women in the Out Islands is further emphasised in explicit commentary from various characters. Elliania's mother declares that she does not consider binding an agreement struck between "mere men" (*FF* 749); and an Outislander man rhetorically asks: "What warrior can stand before a woman's will?" (*FF* 188). Although Outislander men may hold considerable power in the male-only warrior sphere within which they mainly operate, they nevertheless answer to the matriarchs of their mother clans.

Paula Webster defines matriarchy as the "mirror opposite" of patriarchy: "a society in which women as a class [have] power and authority over men" (142), and this is clearly the case in Hobb's Out Islands. In that respect, the Out Islands function in *The Realm of the Elderlings* as the ultimate opposite of fiercely patriarchal Chalced. Yet, while Chalced is clearly a dystopia, the Out Islands are not pictured as utopian. Although Outislanders are portrayed with some admiration as honour-bound, just, and hardy, their society is also depicted as inhospitable and harsh, and in *The Farseer Trilogy*, the raiding Outislanders who threaten the Six Duchies are portrayed as brutal and capable of inhuman cruelty. It is interesting to note that Chalced and the Out Islands are both decidedly warlike nations; unlike many a feminist visionary of matriarchy¹⁶, Hobb does not picture matriarchal society as pacifistic. As Webster writes, however, the value of the matriarchal vision lies not in its function "as a model for a future society, for ultimately it doesn't resolve the problems of

¹⁶ Such as, for example, Elizabeth Gould Davis (65)

hierarchy, sex oppression, or class relations, [...] but in its rejection of power in the hands of men, regardless of the form of social organization” (155). By constructing a matriarchal society in the Out Islands, *The Realm of the Elderlings* refuses to acknowledge patriarchy as inevitable or natural.

Depicting such a wide range of different cultural conceptions of gender roles, *The Realm of the Elderlings* emphasises the contingency of such roles. While twelve-year-old Malta from Bingtown is told that it is “natural” for her “to wish for lovely gowns and wonderful evenings dancing with handsome young men” (*SoM* 430), the similarly aged Elliania from the Out Islands wants only “what any other girl my age wants”, namely “to ride my pony out in the wind. And I want my own boat to scull across Sendalfjord, and my own skates of gear to set for fish” (*GF* 33). Both of these assertions appear self-evident within their own cultural contexts; yet, read alongside each other, they render absurd the notion of gender roles as “natural”.

However, this critical perspective risks drowning in the sheer volume of routine assertions in the work concerning the “natures” of men and women respectively. For *The Realm of the Elderlings*, in its entirety, is littered with comments of the type “[s]he strode like an angry man” (*SoM* 470), or “Ophelia retained a female perspective on life” (*MS* 83-4). We are told that “[s]etting limits is part of being a man” (*FE* 566), that “guile is a woman’s best weapon” (*WP* 63), and that “even the homeliest little girl dreams that a man might fall in love with her inner spirit” (*DK* 94). Such comments are uttered by all manner of characters, as well as by the third-person narrator, in contexts where the reader is not invited to be critical of the speaker’s perspective. Although *The Realm of the Elderlings* offers ample criticism of essentialist notions of gender elsewhere in the work, the abundant existence of this type of utterances threatens to undermine that criticism, working instead to reaffirm essentialist thinking and conservative gender roles.

Moreover, despite the fact that *The Realm of the Elderlings* portrays cultures with widely differing conceptions of gender roles, none of the depicted cultures go beyond the binary construction of gender. In no culture in Hobb’s storyworld is the distinction between “men” and “women” absent, nor does any culture acknowledge more than two genders, or understand gender as in any way separable from biological sex. While *The Realm of the Elderlings*, despite some lapses, does repeatedly and insistently emphasize the cultural contingency of gender roles, it leaves the basic premise of binary gender largely intact—although, as we shall see in section 3:iii, there are notable exceptions.

II. We Can Make Our Own Rules

Dynamic Patriarchy

Gender roles and relations in *The Realm of the Elderlings* are not only contingent upon cultural differences; they are also subject to historical change. According to Rainer Emig, high fantasy of the pseudo-medieval kind is typically ahistorical, depicting “a world that seems stuck in a stagnant time” (87). *The Realm of the Elderlings*, however, rejects such a stagnant understanding of history—indeed, quite explicitly: “Bingtown will go on. But it will never be what it was before, because Bingtown never was ‘what it was before’. Bingtown thrives on change. Bingtown is change”, as one character states (*DK* 87-8). This insistence on the dynamic nature of history is especially notable in those parts of the series, *The Liveship Traders Trilogy* and *The Rain Wild Chronicles*, which are set in the cultural region of Bingtown and the neighbouring Rain Wilds. “Patriarchy is not a historical constant” (Walby 173), and Hobb, in her portrayal of gender relations in Bingtown and the Rain Wilds, depicts patriarchy as a continuously evolving system, taking a variety of forms, sometimes expanding its control, sometimes losing ground.

The Liveship Traders Trilogy and *The Rain Wild Chronicles* take place in a society in which patriarchy is steadily expanding its field of influence, the acceptable range of women’s behaviour becoming gradually more and more restricted. Traditionally, Bingtown and Rain Wild society has been comparatively equal, with gender-neutral inheritance laws (*DK* 102), a wide range of occupations available to women, and with a vote on the council granted to the oldest member of each Trader¹⁷ family regardless of sex (*SoM* 316-7). At the time of Hobb’s series, however, women are increasingly pushed away from the public sphere and encouraged to occupy themselves within the private sphere of the home. Sons are increasingly given precedence over daughters in matters of inheritance (*DK* 102), and it is becoming normal for married female Traders to cede their votes to their husbands (*SoM* 317). The development in the Bingtown area largely mirrors the movement towards a more private form of patriarchy which took place in Britain (and other parts of Europe) during the 19th century following the growth of the middle-class (Walby 183).

Althea Vestrit, deeply discontent with the ideal of “fragile helplessness that now

¹⁷ Traders are the descendants of the original settlers and comprise the merchant aristocracy of Bingtown and the Rain Wilds.

pass[es] for femininity in Bingtown” (*MS* 84), longingly muses upon her great-grandmother, who originally commissioned the family liveship *Vivacia* and captained it for thirty-five years “back when women could still do such things without creating a scandal” (*SoM* 47). In Althea’s own age, however, although a woman may own a ship, she is expected to have a husband to sail it for her (*SoM* 218), and although Althea has been taught sailing by her father, the *Vivacia* is nevertheless given to her older sister Keffria (and thus, in effect, to Keffria’s husband Kyle) upon their father’s death (*SoM* 135-6). In the Rain Wilds, Thymara also notes the change of attitudes. “[A]t one time,” she tells her friend Tats, “Trader women proved themselves just as men did. By surviving” (*DH* 291).

A generational shift is depicted between Keffria and her mother Ronica. While Ronica has always been in control of the management of the family’s estate, Keffria considers such matters “a man’s load of decisions and work” (*SoM* 174); in Keffria’s opinion, elderly Trader women should lead “sedate lives of ease, tending their rose gardens and grandbabies” (*SoM* 174). Keffria has adopted, and actively advocates, the new ideals of passive femininity. Here, *The Realm of the Elderlings* again demonstrates how women can become complicit in patriarchal oppression.

However, in *The Liveship Traders Trilogy* the chief representative for the encroaching patriarchal order is Keffria’s husband Kyle, his attempts to gain control over the Vestrit family functioning as a metonym for the increase in patriarchal control in Bingtown at large. At the death of his father-in-law, he declares himself “the man of this family” and claims authority over all its members (*SoM* 221). “You’ve done very well, for a woman, all these years,” he tells Ronica. “But times are changing, and Ephron should not have left you to cope with everything on your own” (*SoM* 209). As a major agent for these changing times, Kyle now intends to be the one to “run things” (*SoM* 209).

The struggles of the Vestrit women against Kyle’s authority thus become symbolic of the larger struggles of women against patriarchal forces. The most explicit resistance is offered by Althea, who consistently and utterly refuses to abide by the new Bingtown standards of acceptable femininity. “I can see that you go through life athwart it,” the enigmatic woodcarver Amber tells her. “You see the flow of events, you are able to tell how you could most easily fit yourself into it. But you dare to oppose it. And why? Simply because you look at it and say, ‘this fate does not suit me. I will not allow it to befall me’” (*SoM* 280). The fate which Althea will not accept is the confined life of a “proper” Bingtown woman, and in her struggle for her right to determine her own life, she is wholly uncompromising. Following Kyle’s rash promise that he will give her the *Vivacia* “if but one reputable captain

would vouch for [her] seamanship” (*SoM* 313), Althea sets out to secure such proof; and when she cannot find employment aboard a ship as a woman, she does so disguised as a boy, determined to “prove herself worthy” unencumbered by prejudice (*SoM* 362).

Beside Althea’s outright rebellion, Hobb also portrays other modes of resistance to patriarchy. Ronica, having realised that she, as well as Althea, is “now at the mercy of what Kyle consider[s] fitting for a woman”, reasons that “it would be very wise if she [does] not appear to oppose Kyle”—such open opposition, she fears, might land her “with a financial noose about her neck” (*SoM* 224). However, neither does she intend to surrender her powers over the family and estate to him; instead of open rebellion, she chooses to undermine his authority by quietly continuing as she always has and by exerting her influence over Keffria and other dependants. Keffria elects a similar path. Although she initially accepts her husband’s domination over her, she eventually comes to resent it, but like Ronica, she does not choose open opposition. Kyle, she muses, is “stupid enough to think she [has] to obey him” (*SoM* 345). Exploiting this “stupidity”, Keffria lets Kyle retain that belief while simultaneously determining her own course of action in his absence.

If the development of patriarchy in Bingtown is similar to that of 19th century Europe, the methods of resistance practised by the Vestrit women also bear comparison with those of the feminist movements of that time. Walby discusses the strategies of the various women’s movements in Victorian England, concluding that while some groups, such as the suffragettes, fervently demanded entry into the male public sphere “despite the slurs it cast upon their ‘femininity’ and status as ladies”, other groups rather “sought to work within an expanded notion of ‘women’s private’ sphere”, thus “effectively [stretching] the notion of respectable feminine activities without challenging the dichotomy between it and the masculine” (105). In *The Liveship Traders Trilogy*, Althea’s open revolt recalls the strategy of the suffragettes, while the quiet resistance of Ronica and Keffria resembles the second strategy. In *The Rain Wild Chronicles*, Alise, too, engages in a kind of quiet resistance as she attempts to extend the limited options of her genteel feminine existence to include scholarship (*DK* 65). Later, her dedication to the self-same research leads her to adopt more outright strategies of resistance. With the examples of Althea, Ronica, Keffria, and Alise, *The Realm of the Elderlings* asserts that women need not be powerless victims of patriarchy; resistance is possible, and its strategies can be many. The patriarchal system, Hobb’s work suggests, is “stupid enough” to believe that all have to follow its decrees; but if women realise that and refuse to comply, they do not have to pick up and wear “the garment fate has woven for them” (*SoM* 280).

Walby notes that the movement towards a more private form of patriarchy has often

been closely tied to questions of class. “Indeed,” she writes, “the possibility of [upper class] women to be domesticated may be predicated upon the exploitation of the labour of a subordinated group of women and men” (175). The growth of the domestic ideology in the Victorian era primarily affected women of the middle-classes (179-80). Such a class-based discrepancy in gender roles is reflected in Hobb’s Bingtown also. Althea refers to the privatisation of patriarchy as the “custom of showing one’s wealth by keeping one’s women idle” (*SoM* 47), and while a career as a sailor is not deemed proper for a Trader’s daughter, the members of Bingtown’s fisher families work their family ships together, regardless of sex (*SoM* 233). Hobb’s work thus recognises that feminine passivity is a “privilege” of the middle and upper classes; poor people cannot “afford for women not to work outside the home” (Walby 180-1).

In *The Liveship Traders Trilogy*, the trend towards a more private form of patriarchy is largely depicted as an effect of cultural influence from Chalced. Althea understands the new ideals of femininity as a “stupid Chalcedean custom” (*SoM* 47), and Kyle’s function as the embodiment of patriarchy is repeatedly connected to his Chalcedean parentage and upbringing. Encroaching patriarchy is thus depicted as something foreign. In the novella “Homecoming”, however, an alternative image emerges as Hobb tells the story of the original settlers to Bingtown and the Rain Wilds. Fiercely patriarchal ideology, in *The Liveship Traders Trilogy* attributed to Chalced, is here shown to be equally present in Bingtown’s own Jamaillian heritage.

In “Homecoming”, a motley crew of criminals, debtors, adventure seekers and political dissidents are exiled from Jamillia along with their families. Effectively marooned on the then uninhabited and singularly inhospitable “Cursed Shores”, they are left to survive as best they can. In addition to providing the reader with a piece of the history of Bingtown and the Rain Wilds, the novella is also a portrait of patriarchy in a process of dissolution. Jamaillian society, as depicted in “Homecoming”, is profoundly patriarchal. Forced marriage is the norm for women (195), and a married woman is expected to “trust her husband to manage her life” (196). As Lord Jathan Carrock is sent into exile for plotting against the Satrap, his wife and children are exiled alongside him as a matter of course (197).

The exiles in “Homecoming” initially attempt to maintain traditional Jamaillian gender roles. When they are first abandoned in a swampy jungle, Lady Carillion Carrock, protagonist and first-person narrator of the story, notes: “Now we are seventy-two souls in this forsaken place, of which forty are able-bodied men” (205). As the hardships of their situation become acute, however, the group is forced to recognise the abilities not only of its

male members, but of its female ones as well. On their trek in search of better land, “[e]very one of [them], man, woman and child, carries as much as possible” of their meagre supplies (207); they can no longer afford to maintain illusions of feminine weakness. In this precarious situation, too, the competencies of everyone become important for survival. Carillion, an artist, puts her creativity to use in devising sleeping nests suspended in the trees, thus relieving the group from having to sleep on the acid muddy ground (208). In the Rain Wilds, Carillion’s artistic knowledge proves to be far more than the ornamental but useless accomplishment of an idle noblewoman.

Patriarchy is not overthrown without opposition, however. When one of Carillion’s and her friend Sewet’s experimental suspended walkways fall, causing the injury of one man, he complains that “this is what happens when women try their knitting skills as construction” (224), and when Carillion becomes too vocal in suggesting ways for the group to better their situation, two outraged men ask her “what decent Jamaillian woman would raise her voice in anger before men” (222). Carrilion’s husband Jathan, who has for a time been absent as a member of a scouting party, returns and tells her that he will now “take charge of his family”, patronisingly commending her for having kept herself busy in his absence (241). Nevertheless, as Carillion’s ideas are proved to work, the exiles use her platforms and walkways; and when most of the group gets lost in a magical underground city found in the jungle, it is Carillion’s resourcefulness and artistic skill which lead to their rescue (272-4). Moreover, the discovery of her own competency gives Carillion the strength she needs to defy her husband, in the end refusing to come with him when he decrees that the family should leave in search of a better place (251).

In “Homecoming”, Hobb depicts the opposite development of that found in *The Liveship Traders Trilogy*. Here, rather than growing stronger, the influence of patriarchal ideology gradually diminishes. “Homecoming” thus provides the reader with an explanation for the comparative equality of traditional Bingtown and Rain Wilds society: just as the poor cannot afford to keep their women idle, as Althea puts it, the original settlers of the Cursed Shores cannot afford to waste skill and labour power by upholding discourses of feminine weakness and incompetency. Times of hardship, Hobb’s work suggests, requires that everyone, regardless of sex, be recognised as “able-bodied”. Having once been acknowledged as competent, women will not be easily subdued again. The idea of crisis as an opportunity for female liberation can also be found elsewhere in *The Realm of the Elderlings*. Alise, reminiscing about the time shortly after a Chalcedean attack on Bingtown, recalls that “[p]eople—even women—had left their usual safe orbits and pitched in, doing whatever they

must to rebuild” (DK 61).

Another group of exiles whose precarious situation lends them an opportunity to renegotiate gender relations is portrayed in *The Rain Wild Chronicles*. The quartet tells the story of a group of young dragons and their adolescent human “keepers”, as they leave their native Rain Wild settlement behind in search for the fabled city Kelsingra. Both the dragons and their keepers are in some way considered misfits; the dragons are stunted and unable to fly, and most of the keepers are shunned by their native community for being born too “heavily marked by the Rain Wilds” (DK 232). The Rain Wilds, teeming with ancient magic, affect all who live there, and it is common for its inhabitants gradually to develop characteristics such as scales, pebbly growths, and glowing eyes. However, infants who manifest too many of these traits at birth are deemed unfit to live and are usually abandoned to the wilderness (DK 175-8). Those who are, for some reason, kept alive, are forbidden to wed and to reproduce (DK 177).

As the dragon keepers leave civilisation behind, however, many of them begin to question their enforced celibacy. “Where we are going, we can make our own rules”, Gref, the self-appointed leader of the group, asserts (DK 293), and the prohibition on sexual intercourse becomes one of the first rules to be discarded. Jerd, one of the female keepers, celebrates the abandonment of sexual restraint as the key to her liberation: “After a lifetime of being told that no one should touch you, that no one would or could touch you because you were born too much of a monster? Then a soft-skinned boy with a gentle manner doesn’t seem to think it matters... that just made me feel free. So I decided to be free,” she tells Thymara, her fellow keeper (DH 241). Along with the total ban on her sexuality, Jerd also relinquishes more ordinary Rain Wild standards of sexual morality, engaging in a non-committed sexual life with several of the male keepers in quick succession.

Even so, Hobb problematises this sexual revolution. As discussed in section 2.i, *The Realm of the Elderlings* is largely critical of the ideology of free sex. and in *The Rain Wild Chronicles*, Hobb suggests that the keepers’ new order is merely the replacement of one mode of patriarchal oppression with another. Instead of imposed celibacy, the female keepers find themselves under increasing pressure to perform sexually. “[Y]ou need to choose who you will accept as a partner,” Gref tells Thymara (DH 201), who has so far not engaged in any sexual relationship at all. Hobb here aligns herself with the strand of radical feminist thought which considers the so-called sexual liberation of the twentieth century as a patriarchal backlash, ostensibly emancipating but in fact working to provide men with greater access to women’s bodies (Walby 122-3). Gref pays lip service to feminist sentiments, declaring:

I respect some of our oldest traditions. I was largely raised by my mother, and she kept the old rules, the rules from when the Rain Wilds were first settled. Back then, the Traders agreed that a woman could stand on an equal footing with her husband and make her own choices. [...] I see the wisdom of letting women have a say in their lives, and I'm willing to respect it (*DH* 200).

However, the right he grants Thymara of making “her own choice” only extends as far as choosing with which of the available male keepers she will mate. Even in his ostensibly feminist statement quoted above, Grefth can only conceive of “a woman” in relation to “her husband”; women, in Grefth’s understanding, necessarily belong to men. “If you don’t choose a protector,” he asks Thymara, “who is going to protect you?” (*DH* 202), further warning her that if she does not promptly make her choice clear, “that choice may be taken from [her]” (*DH* 203).

Hobb lets Thymara make explicit the transition from one form of patriarchal oppression to another: “Can you see that for me it’s just another rule that he’s talking about putting on me? His rule is that I have to choose a mate. [...] How is that better than the old rule?” (*DH* 293). According to radical feminism, Walby writes, “[i]f women do win a victory, then patriarchal forces will regroup and regain control over them in a different way” (173). Such ideas are reflected in *The Rain Wild Chronicles*: by going on the Kelsingra expedition, the dragon keepers have escaped the rigid social control of their families and neighbours. The female keepers, moreover, have also escaped the ideology of feminine weakness; they are recognised as able and competent, and each of them is expected to care for their own dragon equally well as their male peers. However, dynamic patriarchy quickly adapts, and counters this liberation with new ways of asserting male dominance through sexuality.

Nevertheless, resistance is still possible. “I won’t be pushed,” Thymara declares (*DH* 204), stubbornly defending her right to “choose no one” (*DH* 203). The neo-patriarchal ideology championed by Grefth is also contrasted with the equal gender relations of the dragons. “Among dragons and Elderlings, we knew that every female is a queen, free to make her own choices and follow her own wishes,” the dragon Sintara declares (*DH* 122) and encourages Thymara’s resistance: “Show them that you are a queen, not a cow to be bred at the bull’s rutting” (*CoD* 31). Dragons, we learn, do not form lasting pair bonds (*BoD* 2), and although their mating involves rough mating battles, rape does not occur among them (*SoD* 487).

Moreover, the renegotiation of sexual relations does have some truly liberating effects. Walby notes that the sexual revolution of the 20th century “has opened up a space for greater tolerance of a wider range of sexual conduct” (124). This is the case in the emergent

Kelsingra community, too. The expedition members no longer consider marriage as a necessary prerequisite for sexual relations, and women, like Jerd, can engage in numerous sexual relations without facing persecution or ostracism. Even Grefit is open to the idea that a person may want several different partners within a lifetime (*DH* 203). Even more striking, Kelsingra becomes the first of all cultures described in *The Realm of the Elderlings* to accept open homosexuality (*BoD* 162). “Perhaps,” Alise muses, “once one realized how deeply one could bond with a creature as foreign as a dragon, all forms of human love seemed more acceptable” (*BoD* 162).

In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, patriarchy is a dynamic system, continuously undergoing change. It is, Hobb’s work suggests, immensely adaptable; therefore, struggle against it must also be continuous, and wary of its variable form. However, Hobb also insists on the possibility for resistance. Portraying characters successfully rebelling against patriarchal structures and decrees, *The Realm of the Elderlings* asserts that gender relations are the subject of ongoing negotiations in which patriarchy can be overcome through the joint efforts of its victims.

III. Oh, When the Fool Pisses, Pray Tell, What’s the Angle?

The Performativity of Gender

According to Butler’s performative theory, gender is not something that we “are”, but something that we “do” (“Gender” 34). Far from being the expression of an internal essence, gender consists of nothing but “bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds”, institutionalised and endlessly repeated to maintain an illusion of stability and coherence (191). “[T]he various acts of gender create the idea of gender,” Butler claims, “and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (190). Gender can thus be understood as a perpetual performance. Just like actors use a combination of words, gestures and props to create and maintain an illusion in the minds of their audience, we all participate in the never-ending creation and maintenance of “masculinity” and “femininity” through the acts we incessantly perform for ourselves and each other. Butler stresses that gender performance generally is not to be understood as deliberate or optional; there can be no independent subject behind the performance of gender, because gender is part of that which constitutes the subject in the first place (“Bodies” 175-6). However, she nevertheless notes the subversive potential of deliberate gender performances or “impersonations”, such as drag or cross-

dressing. “*In imitating gender,*” she writes, “*drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*” (“Gender” 187, emphasis in original). In this section, I explore passages in *The Realm of the Elderlings* which challenge the “naturalness” of the gender division by emphasising and calling attention to the performativity of gender. I do this by considering the examples of three characters: Althea, Malta, and the Fool, investigating the different ways in which these three engage in gender performance.

When Althea adopts the role of sailor boy in order to gain employment aboard a ship, she takes her place in a long literary tradition of cross-dressing women (Clute et al. 395). Cross-dressing, for various purposes, is one of the most common strategies employed by the female fantasy protagonists in Tolmie’s study (148-9); Victoria Flanagan likewise notes the prevalence of especially female-to-male cross-dressing in literature for children and adolescents (xv); and the female sailor (or soldier) disguised as a man is a favourite trope of the folk ballad genre¹⁸.

Flanagan notes that whereas male-to-female cross-dressing in children’s literature is often used for comical effect, with the cross-dressed boys depicted as uncomfortable and unconvincing in their performance, “girls dress themselves as boys in order to escape societies which seek to repress and limit femininity” (99–100) and their performance is usually very successful (103). This is the case also for the female cross-dressers in Tolmie’s study (148), and likewise for Hobb’s Althea. As a woman, Althea is criticised for her inadequate performance of femininity. When Althea becomes Athel, however, she¹⁹ is able to fit in seamlessly with the male crew of the ship on which she is employed. Her skills as a sailor are noted with approval (*SoM* 596), she distinguishes herself as a skinner while working on a butchering ship (*SoM* 478), and she attracts the sexual interest of heterosexual women (*MS* 198). In accordance with the conventions of the female cross-dressing narrative as outlined by Flanagan, Althea thus manages to assume “a ‘genuine’ masculine persona” and is even able to “outperform the same males which she originally set out to emulate” (103), thus putting the idea of “authentic” or “natural” gender into question.

Throughout the episode of Althea’s cross-dressing, Hobb stresses the performative aspect of the endeavour. “The cross-dressing heroine initially embarks upon a process of learning how to ‘perform’ as a male”, Flanagan writes (103), and this is the case with Althea too, quite literally. The woodcarver Amber (herself one of the personas of the master-

¹⁸ See, for example, “Billy Taylor”, “The Handsome Cabin Boy”, or “Caroline and her Young Sailor Bold”.

¹⁹ I use “she” about the character even when in male persona, following the usage in the fiction. It is clear from the narrative that Althea chooses her male disguise out of practical necessity, not because she perceives herself as a man. Indeed, she feels “relieved” when eventually able to discard her disguise (*MS* 84).

performer the Fool, discussed below) takes Althea under her wing and teaches her “how to move and walk and sit as if she were male” (*SoM* 363). Being Athel, Althea “shrug[s] her shoulders in boyish bravado” (*SoM* 383), “deliberately set[s] her cap at a jauntier angle” (*SoM* 603), and watches the brutal butchery of sea mammals without letting her revulsion show, “as she was sure a true youth would have done” (*SoM* 378). *The Realm of the Elderlings* thus emphasises the idea of gender as the “stylized repetition of acts” (“Gender” Butler 191, emphasis in original); carefully repeating this set of gestures and mannerisms, Althea appears “just like any tough ship’s lad” (*SoM* 600).

Patriarchal society, however, only allows Althea to perform masculinity if she does it so seamlessly as to actually pass for male. Being female but demonstrating “masculine” skills, Althea breaks the “taboo against the sameness of men and women” (Rubin 178), a transgression which is not easily forgiven once discovered. The approval of the ship’s captain, who has just commended Athel for his work and offered him continued employment, is turned to anger and disgust when Athel reveals herself as Althea. Gender, as Butler points out, “is a performance with clearly punitive consequences [...] indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do gender right” (190), and behaviours which risk blurring the binary distinction are not tolerated. Even the sympathetic Grag is confused by Althea’s gender-blending:

You wear your hair sensibly on deck, I’ve seen you wipe your hands down your shirt front, and you went barefoot and trousered the whole time you were pretending to be a ship’s boy. Yet I can still remember a very feminine woman in my arms, perfumed like violets, and dancing as gracefully as... well, as gracefully as you scamper up the rigging. How do you do it, Althea? [...] How do you move so easily in both worlds? Where do you really belong? (*MS* 92)

Although his words are spoken with admiration, it is clear that Grag cannot make sense of a person whose behaviour does not fit squarely within one pole of the gender binary.

Althea, however, rejects his division of worlds: “Why must it be the one or the other?” (*MS* 92). For despite Kyle’s claims to that effect, Althea does not in fact “want to be a man” (*SoD* 702); what she wants is acknowledgement of her person unencumbered by the fact of her physical sex. Althea thus embodies such androgynous qualities as advocated by, among others, Carolyn G. Heilbrun. Heilbrun writes: “I believe that our future salvation lies in a movement away from sexual polarization and the prison of gender toward a world in which individual roles and the modes of personal behaviour can be freely chosen” (ix-x). With its

portrayal of Althea—and, as will be seen below, of the Fool—*The Realm of the Elderlings* appears to endorse such an ideal of androgyny.

Through her successful performance of masculinity, Althea subverts the idea of a “natural” connection between physical sex and gender; if a person with a female body can perform masculinity as convincingly as to “pass” for a man, what then ties masculinity to the male body? But, as Butler repeatedly stresses, gender is no less a matter of performance in cases where the body and the enacted gender of a person are perceived to “match”. “If gender attributes and acts [...] are performative, then there is no pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured” (“Gender” 192), she writes. “Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived” (193). Marjorie Garber, in her investigation into the cultural phenomenon of cross-dressing, similarly notes that while the transvestite community “has bought into the concept of woman as artefact, assembled from a collection of parts”, the same is true for woman’s magazines. Cross-dressing culture, then, makes visible “the degree to which all women cross-dress as women when they produce themselves as artefacts” (49). “You’re not playing the role of a boy anymore,” Amber reminds Althea (*MS* 295). “No,” Althea replies,

Now I’m playing the role of a Bingtown woman. It is equally false to me. [...] I feel trapped in these clothes; I must walk a certain way, sit a certain way. [...] I must speak to people according to proper protocol. [...] But worst of all, I must pretend to want things I don’t really want (*MS* 295-6).

For Althea, neither sailor boy nor genteel lady are expressions of her “true” essence; both are “roles” which she has to play, “assembled from a collection of parts” (Garber 49); and both appear confining to her.

The idea of performing one’s “own” gender, however, is most thoroughly thematised in *The Realm of the Elderlings* through the portrayal of Malta. As is shown in the previous two sections, *The Realm of the Elderlings* depicts gender as both culturally and historically contingent; what is considered “feminine” or “masculine” in one place and time in the fiction is not necessarily so in another. But even within one single society, feminist theorists argue, there may be several permissible ways of “doing gender”. Mimi Schippers emphasises the need to consider femininity as made up of several co-existing configurations, hierarchically ordered in relation to each other but all understood as distinct from masculinity (89). Such an understanding of multiple femininities can be found in *The Realm of the Elderlings*, too. Malta expressly distances herself from the “respectable” and “boring” version of femininity

championed by her mother and grandmother; yet, she also rejects the “mannish” behaviour of her aunt Althea (*SoM* 431). Instead, she projects for herself a feminine ideal which is “mysterious and magical, shyly demure and unknowable, and yet daring and extravagant” (*SoM* 431).

In her pursuit of the embodiment of these qualities, Malta engages in a gender performance which is highly deliberate and requires quite as careful practice as that undertaken by the female-to-male crossdressers in Flanagan’s study (103). Like the target readers of handbooks of crossdressing, as cited by Garber (48), Malta rehearses gestures and facial expressions in front of her mirror in order to hone them to perfection (*MS* 221), and when performing to a receptive audience, her every movement is carefully selected in order to achieve the effect she desires:

‘You are silent,’ Reyn observed in a chastened voice. ‘I have offended you.’

She moved to seize the advantage. He must think his position uncertain, but not hopeless. She tried to put a timorous smile on her face. ‘I am not accustomed... that is, no one has ever spoken to me of such...’ She let her voice trail away doubtfully. She took a breath as if composing herself. ‘My heart is beating so... Sometimes, when I am frightened, I become quite... Do you suppose you could bring me a glass of wine?’ She lifted both hands and patted lightly at her cheeks, as if endeavouring to restore herself. (*MS* 135-6).

Using verbal cues such as “*tried to put*”, “*let her voice*”, and “*as if*”, Hobb makes perfectly clear that the shy and delicate femininity projected by Malta does not consist of anything but “acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires” (Butler “Gender” 185). Malta holds “her breath for a moment, hoping the effort [will] redden her cheeks as with blush” (*MS* 136) and “scrape[s] her teeth over her lips to redden them” (*MS* 316). Like any performer, moreover, Malta is well aware of the importance of lighting and stage design; going to a secret midnight rendezvous with an admirer, she pauses “to push back her hood, shake out her hair and spread it carefully over her shoulders”, before “enter[ing] the spill of light from the gazebo”, “stop[ing] where she [can] be half in shadow”, then “turn[ing] her face to the candlelight’s caress and open[ing] her eyes wide” (*MS* 316). Only after such careful preparations is she ready to launch her scene.

Malta’s repertoire includes a wide variety of different femininities. In order to further her various interests, she moves effortlessly between the roles of naïve and sensitive young woman, knowing seductress (*MS* 304-5), tragic heroine (*MS* 316-20), and dutiful daughter (*MS* 115-6). Her performances are initially games and interesting challenges, pursued to

dispel boredom and gain advantages; however, as Malta's world collapses around her, she soon finds herself performing in earnest. When the course of the narrative positions Malta as a hostage on a Chalcedean ship together with the Satrap of Jamaillia, her skill of feminine "impersonation" becomes her means of survival, and she is well aware of the varying cultural expectations which she has to negotiate: "She did not need to be a Bingtown Trader here; to survive on this ship, she must think like a woman of Chalced" (*SoD* 394). Putting her trust in the power of "[a]ttitude and bearing" (*SoD* 396), she manages to raise the Satrap's, and hence her own, status aboard the ship through a combination of creeping deference towards the Satrap and haughty disdain towards everyone else, making good use of gestures and mannerisms that she and her friends have "practiced since they were nine years old" (*SoD* 398). Later, as the two are taken from their Chalcedean captors by pirates, she changes her role yet again, engaging in witty banter and cheery flirtation with the pirate captain in order to keep him happy (*SoD* 511). Femininity is thus construed as a gallery of character "types", and as she deliberately chooses which "type" of woman to "be", Malta indicates that she does not regard herself as essentially being either of them.

Through the depiction of Malta, *The Realm of the Elderlings* emphasises the artificiality of gender as well as partakes in the understanding of femininity as varied and multiple. Moreover, it highlights the significance of gender performance in social interaction. Whereas those who fail to perform gender according to the norms of society are punished, successful performance can bring considerable social advantages. This is especially true when the performer, like Malta, is sensitive to the subtle shifts of social norms and can adapt their performance accordingly.

Being a young adolescent, however, Malta is perhaps something of an apprentice performer, and critical audiences sometimes find her displays "overacted". When a servant drily remarks that Malta "should be on a stage" (*MS* 186), it is not a compliment to her successful gender performance, but rather a sign of her failure to convince. Other observers categorise Malta's behaviour as "parody" (*MS* 293) or regard her as "deceptive" (*MS* 119). Paradoxically, whereas Althea effortlessly manages to perform "genuine" masculinity, the femininity performed by Malta attracts a certain amount of scepticism. As for other cross-dressers, then, the chief challenge faced by Malta is to perform her chosen gender as seamlessly as to "pass".

Juxtaposing the two characters Althea and Malta and depicting their different approaches to gender performance, *The Realm of the Elderlings* puts the claim of natural

gender in serious question. Still, the series' most radical challenge to the idea of natural binary gender comes in the shape of the character variously known as the Fool, Amber, Lord Golden, or Beloved. The character first appears in *The Farseer Trilogy* as the Fool, jester to the king, and is gendered male. In *The Liveship Traders Trilogy*, the same character appears as the female wood-carver Amber; and ze²⁰ emerges yet again in *The Tawny Man Trilogy* as the foppish nobleman Lord Golden, again male. I will use "the Fool" as the name of the character as a whole, as this is how ze is first known both to readers of the series and to FitzChivalry, protagonist and first-person narrator of the *Farseer* and *Tawny Man* trilogies.

As with Althea and Malta, Hobb repeatedly describes the Fool's gender switches in terms of playacting. As Amber, ze tells Althea that ze has "once been an actress in a small company" and hence "played many roles, as both sexes" (*SoM* 363), and when confronted by Amber's old friend Jek while performing as Lord Golden, ze tells her: "You have stumbled into my play, and now I fear you must take up a role in it" (*GF* 315). Indeed, the Fool is construed as a master of performance and disguise of all kinds, not only in terms of gender. With posture, voice, clothing, and makeup, ze cleverly manipulates zir appearance and quickly shifts between different personas depending on the requirements of the situation. Shifting from woman to man, *The Realm of the Elderlings* thus implies, is not a more complicated feat than shifting from sophisticated artisan to dirty slave girl (*MS* 200); and playing female is not much different from playing drunk (*FE* 359); either is only a matter of adopting the right posture, costume, and mannerisms.

Although Fitz consistently understands the Fool as male, referring to zir with masculine pronouns, the question of zir sex is never given a conclusive answer. Indeed, the Fool insistently refuses to provide such an answer, dismissing sex as "[m]ere plumbing, when all is said and done" (*AQ* 634). Instead of providing the requested answer, the Fool mocks the question:

[T]he Fool launched into sudden, hearty song:

'Oh, when the Fool pisses
Pray tell, what's the angle?
Did we take down his pants
Would he dimple or dangle? (*AQ* 635).

²⁰ Discussing the Fool's gender performance, I generally follow Prater (33) in using the gender-neutral pronouns "ze" and "zir". When discussing the character in specific manifestations, however, gendered pronouns appropriate to that persona may be used (as, for example, in the mentions of Amber earlier in this section).

Butler writes, “laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism” (“Gender” xxx). By inviting us to laugh at the gender division, the Fool suggests that the categories of “man” and “woman” are unimportant and even ridiculous; the question of a person’s sex, ze indicates, is relevant only as far as it tells us something about that person’s urination.

“That is one thing that in all my years among your folk I have never become accustomed to. The great importance that you attach to what gender one is,” the Fool declares (*AQ* 634). Yet, with the portrayal of the Fool, *The Realm of the Elderlings* pinpoints exactly how important gender is to the understanding of subjectivity among “our folk”. Individuals without recognisable gender, Butler argues, are unintelligible as persons in our culture (“Gender” 22). With zir fluid gender identity, the Fool is such an “unintelligible” person, and Hobb aptly dramatizes the unease with which such people are commonly regarded and treated. For Fitz, while his friend’s easy shifts between zir different male personas does cause him some moments of doubt as to zir “true” identity (*FE* 334; *FE* 342; *GF* 108), he is never seriously dismayed until he discovers the existence of zir female persona Amber. “[T]he very notion of ‘the person’,” Butler writes,

is called into question by the cultural emergence of those “incoherent” or “discontinuous” gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined (“Gender” 23).

Confronted with his friend’s uncertain gender, Fitz is unable to recognise zir as the person he believes he knows; indeed, to understand zir as a coherent person at all. The discomfort he experiences at this uncertainty is intense. Struggling with feelings of betrayal, he concludes: “I did not truly know him at all. And never had” (*GF* 319), and he fervently demands of the Fool: “Who are you? What are you?” (*GF* 401). The Fool, however, once more refuses to provide the looked-for answer. “You seek a false comfort when you demand that I define myself for you with words,” ze severely tells Fitz (*GF* 402). By thus refusing to define zirself in terms of gender, the Fool refuses to acknowledge the importance of the distinction; denying Fitz an easy way out of his discomfort, ze refuses to accept his discomfort as valid. “You know who I am. [...] As for what I am, you know that, too,” ze insists (*GF* 402). As Prater points out, moreover, “the reader is positioned to think that Fitz is being petty here” (29); despite the novel being narrated by Fitz in the first person, the narrative itself does not offer much sympathy for his unease.

As the Fool refuses to offer a definition of zir gender, so does the work itself. The Fool is never revealed to be “truly” male or female; moreover, neither is zir gender identity defined using any other term. It may seem apt to categorize the Fool as “genderqueer”, as does Prater (28), or non-binary, or some other available term from the abundant vocabulary of non-conforming gender identities. In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, however, the Fool’s own contention appears to be the standing one: “Words do not contain or define any person” (*GF* 402). Like Fitz, the readers are left with the discomfort of not-knowing, their implicit²¹ question answered only with the Fool’s own counter-question: “Why is it important?” (*AQ* 634).

With its depictions of characters such as Althea, Malta, and the Fool, *The Realm of the Elderlings* goes beyond a critique of the patriarchal oppression of women to a more radical questioning of binary gender itself. Using the language of performance and playacting, reminiscent of Butler’s theories, the work presents gender as artificial and constructed, leaving any connection between the sexed body and the gender performed tenuous at most. With the Fool especially, the challenge is made highly explicit, both in terms of the character’s utterances and the unresolved uncertainty about zir sexual status. As the Fool can in many ways be said to constitute the “moral centre” of the series, zir outright rejection of the importance of gender is crucial for an understanding of the work’s gender politics. However, even the Fool is not entirely consistent. Despite dismissing sex as “[m]ere plumbing” (*AQ* 634), there are rare moments in which even ze slips into essentialist reasoning. “I think it is as instinctive for a girl to flirt as it is for boys to show off their muscles and daring”, ze tells Fitz on one occasion (*FE* 401). In the mouth of the Fool, such an utterance cannot be wholly disregarded; instead, it stands as a sign pointing to the contradictory tendencies within the work itself.

²¹ Or perhaps not so implicit, as entering the search phrase “is the Fool a man or a woman” into Google will show.

4. Conclusions

In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, Hobb thoroughly engages with patriarchal structures and mechanisms, portraying patriarchy in a wide range of areas and from multiple angles. Oppression of women is consistently depicted as systematic, and the patriarchal system is portrayed as operating simultaneously in several different spheres of society, these different structures interacting with each other in complex ways. Patriarchy is understood as dynamic and variable; yet, it is not understood as inevitable. Beside her depictions of patriarchal structures, Hobb also depicts several characters engaged in resistance against these structures. Moreover, other modes of sexual organisation are also depicted, notably in the shape of the Out Islands matriarchy. Including such alternative systems in its storyworld, *The Realm of the Elderlings* maintains that patriarchy is neither natural nor unavoidable.

Using a traditional, pseudo-medieval fantasy world as the setting for its exploration of patriarchy, *The Realm of the Elderlings* corresponds closely to the type of medievalist, overtly feminist fantasy work discussed by Tolmie. Like the works in Tolmie's study, *The Realm of the Elderlings* constructs a heavily patriarchal storyworld in order to stage its critique of patriarchy; moreover, again like those works, the critique is often voiced in highly explicit terms, the series anachronistically inserting "a feminist voice [...] into an ostensibly pre-feminist context" (154). However, unlike those works, Hobb's series is not primarily concerned with the triumph of individuals over the patriarchal system, but instead with the workings of the system itself, exposing its mechanisms and putting its basic premises in question. Although examples of "exceptional" (145) female heroines of the type described by Tolmie exist, Althea being the most obvious one, the series also depicts a myriad of characters engaged in other, subtler, forms of resistance against patriarchy—or coping within the system.

Tolmie expresses a concern that overtly feminist messages within traditional, medievalist fantasies may function merely as an excuse, making the old stereotypes more "palatable" (154). "[I]s the insertion of feminist disapproval into familiar situations in some respects a cheap alternative, in terms of imaginative expense, to the much more difficult and unusual creation of alternative fantasies, or radically new or revolutionary fantasy?", she asks (155). However, despite the medievalist trappings of its storyworld, the patriarchal structures depicted in *The Realm of the Elderlings* are not relics from a time long past. With few exceptions, they are easily recognisable features of life in the contemporary West, and the

depiction of them therefore cannot simply be understood as nostalgia. While the political message of *The Realm of the Elderlings* is hardly “radically new or revolutionary”, the series nevertheless works to expose the structures of the patriarchal system, the familiarity of its plot and setting perhaps contributing to making its politics more accessible. Moreover, as Hassler-Forest points out, whereas more radical visions can often be found in less well-known fantasy works, it is interesting in itself “how the common language of popular culture can be appropriated and politicized” (18). In *The Realm of the Elderlings*, Hobb uses the familiar language and format of the epic, medievalist fantasy to voice a critique of patriarchy which is simultaneously clear and nuanced.

For this study, I have chosen a large body of material—the texts included comprise about 9000 pages. Furthermore, I have chosen a broad perspective from which to interrogate these texts, investigating numerous aspects of gender relations in the series. The reason for these choices is a desire to point to a general tendency, present throughout Hobb’s series, to criticise patriarchal structures. However, this broad scope has required me to be brief in my exploration of each specific topic. Several of the issues touched upon in this essay would certainly benefit from more in-depth study. The gender politics of the *Liveship Traders Trilogy*, or the highly complex character the Fool, suggest themselves as such areas which would likely benefit from further investigation. Due to space limits, I have also excluded from my study considerations of hetero- and homosexuality in the series. Depictions of homosexuality in *The Realm of the Elderlings* are considered by Prater, hence I have chosen to focus on other aspects of the series’ gender politics; yet, the subject is far from exhausted. Several feminist theorists consider compulsory heterosexuality the bedrock of patriarchal oppression (i.e. Butler; Rubin; Rich). Therefore, a study considering Hobb’s depictions of homosexuality alongside her treatment of compulsory heterosexuality, explicit as well as implicit, would be highly interesting.

During the process of writing this essay, other possible areas of investigation into Hobb’s work also suggested themselves. Alongside the gender hierarchy, Hobb also depicts other power structures at work. A postcolonial perspective on the *Liveship Traders Trilogy* and the *Rain Wild Chronicles* would likely be rewarding, as might an investigation into questions of ability as regards the dragon keepers in the *Rain Wild Chronicles* or the character Thick in the *Tawny Man Trilogy*. In a study of larger scope, an intersectional reading of *The Realm of the Elderlings*, taking into account the interactions between gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability in the work, might be very interesting indeed.

In conclusion, Robin Hobb’s *The Realm of the Elderlings* engages with gender as one

of its main themes, and the influences of feminist thought upon the work are evident. Multiple strands of feminist theory are discernible within the series. Most notable are the influences from radical feminism and Marxist feminism, but occasionally, the series also invites “newer” perspectives, such as Butler’s post-structural feminism. In the work, these different discourses and theoretical models enter into dialogue with each other; the series provides few simple answers and problematises frequently. Moreover, as both Prater (32) and Elliott (“Manifestations” 25-6) have previously noted, the treatment of gender relations in *The Realm of the Elderlings* is full of contradictions. While the work generally is clearly critical of patriarchal structures and supports a constructionist understanding of gender, its sometimes very radical inclinations are, at other times, undermined by decidedly conservative impulses.

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Appendix: Characters and Places

Alise Kincarron: Bingtown lady with a fervent interest in dragon lore. Enters into a marriage of convenience with Hest Finbok. Occurs in the *Rain Wild Chronicles*.

Althea Vestrit: A member of the Bingtown Trader family Vestrit. Disguises herself as a boy and goes to sea in order to reclaim the family liveship Vivacia from her brother-in-law. Occurs in the *Liveship Traders Trilogy* and the *Rain Wild Chronicles*.

Amber: Woodcarver in Bingtown; a friend of Althea's. One of the personas of the Fool. Occurs in the *Liveship Traders Trilogy* and *Golden Fool*.

Aunbretia Lantis: Bingtown Trader woman who loses her fortune to a faithless lover and later marries for security. Grandmother of Cerise. Occurs in "The Inheritance".

Bellin: Sailor from the Rain Wilds. Follows the Kelsingra expedition. Occurs in the *Rain Wild Chronicles*.

Beloved: Birth name of the character known as the Fool. Occurs in the *Tawny Man Trilogy*.

Bettel: Madam of the brothel where Etta works. Occurs in *Ship of Magic*.

Bingtown: City-state to the south of the Six Duchies. Under Jamaillian rule.

Brashen: A sailor from Bingtown. Friend, and eventually lover, of Althea Vestrit. Occurs in the *Liveship Traders Trilogy* and the *Rain Wild Chronicles*.

Carillion Carrock: Exiled from Jamaillia to the Cursed Shores along with her husband Jathan. An artist, who designs suspended platforms and walkways for the exiles. Occurs in "Homecoming".

Caution: Queen-in-Waiting of the Six Duchies; bears a child out of wedlock. Occurs in *The Wilful Princess and the Piebald Prince*.

Cerise: Bingtown woman who is groped by her friend's husband. Occurs in "The Inheritance".

Chalced: Neighbouring country and traditional enemy of the Six Duchies as well as Bingtown. In many ways constructed as the Evil Land in *The Realm of the Elderlings*. Heavily patriarchal.

Chassim: Daughter of the Duke of Chalced; attempts to stir up a revolution among Chalced's women against the heavily patriarchal system. Occurs in *City of Dragons* and *Blood of Dragons*.

Chivalry: King-in-Waiting of the Six Duchies who abdicates at the discovery of his

- illegitimate son, FitzChivalry. Occurs in the *Farseer Trilogy*.
- Cursed Shore, the:** The stretch of shore on which comes to harbour Bingtown and the Rain Wilds.
- Dutiful:** Prince of the Six Duchies. Son of Kettricken and Verity; engaged to Elliania of the Out Islands. Occurs in the *Tawny Man Trilogy*.
- Elliania:** Narcheska of the Out Islands. Engaged to prince Dutiful of the Six Duchies. Occurs in the *Tawny Man Trilogy*.
- Etta:** Prostitute, romantically involved with Kennitt. Occurs in the *Liveship Traders Trilogy*.
- FitzChivalry, or Fitz:** Illegitimate son of prince Chivalry of the Six Duchies. Protagonist and first-person narrator of the *Farseer Trilogy* and the *Tawny Man Trilogy*.
- Fool, the:** First encountered as the jester of King Shrewd. Dear friend of FitzChivalry's. Occurs in several personas of various genders; zir "true" gender identity is not known. Occurs in the *Farseer Trilogy*, the *Liveship Traders Trilogy*, and the *Tawny Man Trilogy*.
- Grag:** Friend and suitor of Althea Vestrit. Occurs in the *Liveship Traders Trilogy*.
- Greft:** One of the adolescent dragon keepers of the Kelsingra expedition and the self-appointed leader of the group. Occurs in the *Rain Wild Chronicles*.
- Hap:** Foster son of FitzChivalry. Romantically involved with Svanja. Occurs in the *Tawny Man Trilogy*.
- Hest Finbok:** Homosexual Bingtown man who marries Alise Kincarron for respectability. Occurs in the *Rain Wild Chronicles*.
- Jamaillia:** Powerful nation in the far south of the storyworld. Ruled by a Satrap. Heavily patriarchal.
- Jathan Carrock:** A Jamaillian noble, exiled to the Cursed Shores as a punishment for plotting against the Satrap. Husband of Carillion Carrock. Occurs in "Homecoming".
- Jek:** Freelance fighter from the Six Duchies; a friend of Amber's. Occurs in the *Liveship Traders Trilogy* and *Golden Fool*.
- Jerd:** One of the young dragon keepers of the Kelsingra expedition. Chiefly characterised as promiscuous. Suffers a miscarriage during the expedition. Occurs in the *Rain Wild Trilogy*.
- Keffria Vestrit:** Older sister of Althea, mother of Malta, Selden, and Wintrow. Occurs in the *Liveship Traders Trilogy*.
- Kelsingra:** Fabled ancient city; the goal of the expedition in the *Rain Wild Chronicles*.
- Kennit:** Pirate captain. Captures the liveship Vivacia. Rapes Althea. Occurs in *the Liveship*

Traders Trilogy.

Kettricken: Princess of the Mountain Kingdom. The victim of an arranged marriage to prince Verity of the Six Duchies; later its queen. Mother of Dutiful. Occurs in the *Farseer Trilogy* and the *Tawny Man Trilogy*.

Kyle: Husband of Keffria Vestrit. Takes possession of the Vestrit family liveship VIVacia after the death of his father-in-law. Occurs in the *Liveship Traders Trilogy*.

Lord Golden: A Jamaillian noble. One of the personas of the Fool. Occurs in the *Tawny Man Trilogy*.

Malta: Daughter of Keffria and Kyle. Occurs in the *Liveship Traders Trilogy* and the *Rain Wild Chronicles*.

Mirrifen: Apprentice hedge witch whose apprenticeship fails when her mistress dies. Marries for security. Occurs in “Words Like Coins”.

Molly: Girlfriend of the adolescent FitzChivalry. Reunited with him many years later, and married. Occurs in the *Farseer Trilogy* and the *Tawny Man Trilogy*.

Mountain Kingdom, the: Neighbouring country of the Six Duchies. Its ruler is known as the Sacrifice.

Ophelia: A liveship, i.e. a sentient ship, from Bingtown. Occurs in the *Liveship Traders Trilogy*.

Out Islands, the: Island nation in the far north of the storyworld. A Matriarchy. The chief enemy of the Six Duchies in the *Farseer Trilogy*.

Peottre: Maternal uncle of Narcheska Elliania; acts as her guardian in her mother’s absence. Occurs in the *Tawny Man Trilogy*.

Rain Wilds, the: A vast swampy rain forest area close by Bingtown.

Ronica Vestrit: Mother of Althea and Keffria. Occurs in the *Liveship Traders Trilogy*.

Satrap, the: Ruler of Jamaillia.

Selden: Son of Keffria and Kyle. A victim of male-on-male rape. Befriends Chassim as he is held captive by her father the Duke of Chalced. Occurs in the *Liveship Traders Trilogy*, *City of Dragons* and *Blood of Dragons*.

Serilla: Companion-of-the-heart to the Jamaillian Satrap; an expert in Bingtown culture and history. Is given over by the Satrap to a Chalcedean captain who rapes and beats her. Occurs in *Mad Ship* and *Ship of Destiny*.

Sewet: One of the exiles from Jamaillia to the Cursed Shores. A weaver, friend of Carillion’s. Occurs in “Homecoming”.

Shrewd: King of the Six Duchies; father of Chivalry and Verity. Occurs in the *Farseer*

Trilogy.

Sintara: A dragon, tended by Thymara. Occurs in the *Rain Wild Chronicles*.

Six Duchies, the: A feudal monarchy. The chief setting of the *Farseer Trilogy* and the *Tawny Man Trilogy*.

Svanja: Girlfriend of Hap; betrays him and takes his money. Occurs in the *Tawny Man Trilogy*.

Starling: Minstrel from the Six Duchies, friend of FitzChivalry. Occurs in the *Farseer Trilogy* and the *Tawny Man Trilogy*.

Tats: One of the adolescent dragon keepers of the Kelsingra expedition. Romantically involved with Thymara. Occurs in the *Rain Wild Chronicles*.

Thymara: One of the adolescent dragon keepers of the Kelsingra expedition. Romantically involved with Tats. Occurs in the *Rain Wild Chronicles*.

Timbal: Kitchen maid from the Six Duchies. Is seduced by a handsome minstrel, and afterwards lives in fear of pregnancy. Occurs in “Blue Boots”.

Verity: Prince of the Six Duchies. Son of Shrewd and brother of Chivalry. Victim of an arranged marriage to Kettricken. Occurs in the *Farseer Trilogy*.

Vivacia: A liveship, i.e. a sentient ship, belonging to the Vestrit family of Bingtown. Occurs in the *Liveship Traders Trilogy*.

Wintrow Vestrit: Son of Keffria and Kyle. Occurs in the *Liveship Traders Trilogy*.