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“Battles are Ugly When Women Fight”

Gender Roles within the Context of War in Young Adult Fiction

 There are many different aspects of war, from strategic planning and infantry, to medical services and aftercare. To these aspects, we can generally assign gender roles that will apply to a great majority of the acts, realizing of course, that there will be some crossing over between the masculine to feminine. Children’s literature is not immune to the excruciating reality of war. In two of the stories we read this semester, children are subject to violence and the threat of death, all through the lens of maturation and finding one’s place in the world. In this essay, I will discuss Tamora Pierce’s book, Alanna: The First Adventure, (1) and how the character of Alanna chooses to enter into the masculine role of knighthood. I will also look at the second book in C.S. Lewis’ series, “The Chronicles of Narnia”: The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe. (2) I will be specifically looking at the characters of Susan and Lucy, and how, try as they might to avoid war, they are faced with standing at the front lines of a battle they did not anticipate. Alanna chooses the masculine role, within the context of war, while actively denying the feminine. Susan and Lucy are forced into the masculine, all the while embracing their femininity.

 Alanna starts out her journey pointing at her twin brother, Thom, by saying “You should have been Alanna. They always teach the girls magic.” (1, pg 2) Alanna and Thom switch places, sending Thom off to the convent, while Alanna has to go into hiding (her true self) in order to be trained in the royal order. She must tread lightly and always remember her deception; not only would the palace renounce and discipline her if they discovered her secret, her father would undoubtedly disown her.

 While I believe the author may have intended to take the emphasis off of stereotypical feminine traits by changing the focus to her size and stature, it’s hard to deny that she would not be in the predicament she is in if the rules were different and girls could train with the palace knights. She is never truly comfortable in her own skin, (and how could she be?), and it is evident in every conversation and encounter she has. She is constantly trying to deny her femininity (her Gift), not thinking about the future, not truly seeing her plan out to the finish.

 In C.S. Lewis’ masterpiece, The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe, Lewis presents strong female characters in Susan and Lucy Pevensie. When the children wander into the Wardrobe and into the world of Narnia, not only are they forced to grow up --- interestingly enough being forced into a war after fleeing one --- they embrace their feminine traits along with the masculine, as they are at the front lines of the battle against the White Witch. For them, petty societal ‘norms’ are cast aside, and women can fight right alongside their male counterparts.

 When the winter spell begins to break, and Father Christmas presents the Pevensies with their gifts, I believe this is another methodical use of the feminine traits that both Susan and Lucy embody. While Father Christmas does say that Susan and Lucy are not to be in the battle against the White Witch and her minions, in giving them their weapons, he realizes that it may be something he cannot control. Susan receives a bow and quiver and a horn that will call for help in time of need. Lucy receives a diamond bottle full of life potion as well as a small dagger. These items are finesse weapons; the brute weapons are given to Peter. In this gift-giving, Father Christmas synchronizes the masculine and feminine within both of these young ladies.

Alanna kicks and screams throughout the entirety of the story trying to deny her femininity, instead of embracing it. At the beginning of the story, Maude (the mother figure) warns Alanna, “Heal child. Heal all you can, or you’ll pay for it. The gods mean for their gifts to be used.” (1, pg 11) She doesn’t truly believe this until the “Sweating Sickness” takes over the palace and kills Francis, one of her friends. As she goes to his body lying on the chapel altar, she is ashamed for she knows he may still be alive if she had intervened with her Gift. (1, pg 96)

Alanna does not believe that she will be accepted as a woman until Prince Jonathan points out that it doesn’t matter to him whether she is a “girl, boy or dancing bear,” (1, pg 248) he still wants her at his side as squire. He has seen Alanna in action; in the masculine role with her fighting skills, and in the feminine role, in healing him of the Sweating Sickness, as well as triumphing over the Ysandir. The story stops at this point, so we are unable to see if the fight at the Black City and Jonathan’s acceptance of her denial is the catharsis that Alanna needs to experience.

After Aslan offers his flesh in exchange for Edmund’s, he walks slowly toward the Stone Table. The two Pevensie girls follow him and are eventually invited to walk with him. Aslan says, “I am sad and lonely. Lay your hands on my mane so that I can feel you are there and let us walk like that.” (2, pg 179) While the troops are resting for the next day’s battle, the girls are offering soft hands and warm hearts to a lion marching to his death. After Aslan’s resurrection and the battle has ended, Lucy finds herself hovering over Edmund’s wounded body, administering the cordial to him, as well as other wounded soldiers. They did not have to fight to make a difference in the battle against the White Witch; they only needed to use their gifts and be themselves.

Tamora Pierce and the character of Alanna did not employ an earth-shattering storyline with a young girl pretending to be a boy in order to be accepted into the societal norms that she has invaded. This has been seen before in stories like Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night”, Alcott’s Little Women, and Singer’s “Yentl the Yashiva Boy”. Countless other stories and movies have flirted with this idea of crossing over sexual identifications in order to achieve personal goals. These stories ultimately either choose to deny those feminine characteristics that are undeniable, or will embrace them and learn a life lesson through an eventual catharsis at the end of her journey.

C.S. Lewis does a beautiful job of marrying the masculine and feminine in Susan and Lucy Pevensie. He does this with no agenda, as Tamora Pierce clearly has. However, I will not deny that these are completely different books, and Lewis’ agenda is clearly Christian. The problems I had with Alanna were in how the character was presented. She constantly complains about being a girl and is not what I would consider a good role model for young girls. I have not read the other books in the series – perhaps she finally does have that catharsis – but as it stands alone, Alanna cannot see past her own desires to realize that she could become a strong force by embracing her Gift, along with the physical traits that she possessed even before setting foot in the palace. Lucy shows the same sort of determination in wanting to make a difference after Father Christmas instructs her not to fight. “Why sir? I think – I don’t know – but I think I could be brave enough.” “That is not the point. But battles are ugly when women fight.” (2, pg 160) In this one sentence, Lewis makes a beautiful statement and it’s obvious that he is far from being chauvinistic. He understands that we all have our role and we should not deny our gifts.

**Sources:**

1. Pierce, Tamora. *Alanna: The First Adventure*. New York: Atheneum, 1983. Print.
2. Lewis, C. S. *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.* New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001. Print.