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The mage and the serpent: Eadaz and the female heroism in *The Priory of the Orange Tree*

A maga e a serpente: Eadaz e o heroísmo feminino em *O priorado da laranjeira*

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ABSTRACT
This article aims to understand some of Eadaz du Zāla uq-Nāra 's facets as one of the main heroes of Samantha Shannon's high fantasy novel *The Priory of the Orange Tree*. Both the protagonist's significance as a black heroine existing in a secondary world in which there is no patriarchy or racism, and her lesbian relationship with the character Sabran Berehtnet will be analysed. Bernárdez (2020), Betz (2011), Fox (2023), Funck (2016) and Tatar (2021) provide the main theoretical foundation for this paper. Although there are many instances in which Eadaz aligns herself with a more traditional perspective of heroism, most of her heroine's journey represents a subversion. At the end, we come to the conclusion that because of said subversion, the character of Eadaz poses the question of what it even means to be a hero, therefore broadening the concept of a hero's journey and heroism itself.
KEYWORDS: High Fantasy Literature; Feminist Criticism; Black Heroines; Lesbianity; Subversion

RESUMO
Este artigo visa compreender algumas das facetas de Eadaz du Zāla uq-Nāra como uma das heroínas principais do romance de alta fantasia de Samantha Shannon, *O Priorado da Laranjeira*. Serão analisados tanto o peso da protagonista como heroína negra existindo em um mundo secundário no qual não há patriarcado ou racismo, quanto seu relacionamento lésbico com a personagem Sabra Berethnet. Bernárdez (2020), Betz (2011), Fox (2023), Funck (2016) e Tatar (2021) são as principais autoras que estruturam este artigo. Embora haja muitos casos em que Eadaz se alinha com uma perspectiva mais tradicional de heroísmo, a maior parte de sua jornada da heroína representa uma subversão. Ao final, chegamos à conclusão de que, devido a tal subversão, a personagem de Eadaz questiona o que significa ser um herói, ampliando assim o conceito de jornada do herói e do próprio heroísmo.

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura de Alta Fantasia; Crítica Feminista; Heroínas Negras; Lesbianidade; Subversão

Introduction

In the collective imagination that makes up the West, we can usually discern widespread themes and iconographies which represent the foundation of how we contemplate certain archetypes. One of these archetypes is the hero. Commonly portrayed as a beautiful warrior wearing a helmet and branding a sword (Tatar, 2021), the hero and the limits of his heroism appear in literature extremely early in the history of the human race. From the tradition orbiting Achilles, Odysseus, Aeneas, Roland, Beowulf and many others, a somewhat deterministic theoretical basis has been created, restricting the role of the hero to deeply specific and sometimes exclusive contexts. Campbell (2004), for instance, publishes *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* for the first time in 1949, in which he outlines the hero's journey, grounded on what the author calls the *monomyth* — an archetypal quest that, in theory, all heroes would trek in order to conquer supreme subjectivity and prove their heroism. In this discussion, Campbell connects his argument to the epic and the myth; therefore he excludes women from positions of protagonists and heroines (Bernárdez, 2020).

Confined to supporting roles to the heroic and central man, the woman becomes an archetypal extra character, sometimes appearing as the seductress, sometimes as the mother and wife, sometimes as the monstrous female, but never as Subject. "Women may appear in the triumphant stories of a hero's deeds and accomplishments, but all too often they are strangely invisible, lacking agency, voices, and a presence in public life" (Tatar, 2021, p. 15). Whether Helen, Penelope or Circe, the woman is characterized in this literature as an ontological Other, and as an individual who exists strictly *for* the man and the role she can play in his personal hero's journey. Along these lines, even in relatively significant positions, "[…] when the hero is actually a heroine, the entirety of the monomyth and its goal seem to shift in order to accommodate the female gender" (Bernárdez, 2020, p. 95). Thus, in a more intimate sphere, female heroism in literature is defined by patience, loyalty and care (for instance, Penelope, Scheherazade or Cinderella), and although such features are not in essence negative, they exist in this specific context as reaffirmation of gender roles that are harmful to the identity and subjectivity of women, who are frequently denied the opportunity to explore the horizons of their own heroism beyond the traits culturally deemed as traditionally/biologically feminine.

Thereby, when it comes to fantasy literature, there is much of this tradition structuring it, both poetically and narratively speaking. More specifically, when Tolkien published *The Lord of the Rings* in 1954, he coined the subgenre we know today as high fantasy, and it is particularly different from other fantastic and fantasy modes due to the connection that the British author makes — across the entirety of his secondary world — with the ancient epic. So, while he provides an extremely multifaceted characterization of his male characters and their own particular heroisms, as seen in Bilbo, Sam, Aragorn and Faramir, for example, all heroic in their individualities and realities, the presence of female characters who go beyond the classic stereotypes or serve merely as a plot scaffolding with no actual personality/development is scarce. As high fantasy spreads across the globe then, and varied authors experiment with their respective secondary worlds, due to a profound exclusionary tradition and hegemonic editorial norms, it takes a few decades for women to emerge from the shadow of men in this literature. An example of an avant-garde high fantasy in this context, which paved the way for many authors to think about women in this subgenre differently (including the author of the novel that will be analysed in this paper), was *The Mists of Avalon*, published in 1982 by Marion Zimmer Bradley. By employing techniques that Tatar (2021) studies, Bradley proposed a subversive diegetic north and reimagined the Arthurian legends, structuring her female characters not as shallow, expendable or unintelligent, but as courageous, creative, genuinely strong and most importantly, crucial for the plot's unraveling. And as she broke free from the deterministic archetypes and gender roles which had almost always accompanied Arthurian women, Bradley was a pioneer who inspired other authors to revisit the past and explore literature's forgotten women.

In light of this, this paper aims at analysing the character of Eadaz du Zāla uq-Nāra (or Ead Duryan for short), one of the protagonists from the novel *The Priory of the Orange Tree* (2019) by Samantha Shannon, and investigate the many facets of her heroism and the way the author subverts preconceived notions about heroic women in high fantasy literature, especially considering that Eadaz is a black and lesbian heroine. At first, however, it is necessary to contextualize the diegesis in which Eadaz lives: Shannon designed *The Priory of the Orange Tree* as a retelling of the legend of Saint George and the Dragon, who she claims to have never appreciated or admired, mainly because of some problematic plots that surround the knight. For instance, in *The Renoowned History of the Seven champions of Christendom* (1595), by Richard Johnson, we learn of the attempted rape of the nun Lucinda, who, to escape George's threats, took

her own life. There is also the blackmailing tone in George's original proposal at the end of his tale involving the dragon: he will defeat it and free the people who have been subjugated for so long only if everyone in that country converts to Christianity. Therefore, intending to think about the legend from another perspective, in her essay *Damsels Undistressed* (available on her own website), Shannon (2019c, n.p.) states:

> In writing *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, I was driven by a sense of obligation – a desire to answer the story that created the ripples I first encountered in a song as a little girl. A desire to re-assemble and expand on it in a way that made sense to me as a woman and a human being. I wanted to resurrect and shine a light on its lost women, whose names have all but disappeared. I wanted to make them a gift of the orange tree. I wanted to hit back at the George I met in the stories of old, and to wonder what the people of Lasia would have said about him, if only anyone had written his intervention from their perspective. And I wanted someone else to have a chance to slay the dragon.

1 The handmaiden of Cleolind

Following a similar plot to the most ancient version of the tale, which Walter (1995) recounts[1], Shannon crafts the worldbuilding of her secondary world in accordance to how most of the events took place in George's story. In fact, it is understood everywhere that Galian Berethnet (George's counterpart in the narrative) fearlessly slayed the mighty dragon known as The Nameless One and freed the entire world from its fire, and then subsequently founded the Queendom of Inys, which he molded on the principles of knighthood, and appointed himself as the Saint of his made up religion. After that, a strictly female Berethnet bloodline came into existence (a phenomenon that although odd, is what baptized the realm as a *queendom*), which according to Galian, would forever keep The Nameless One imprisoned. That is because, as he bound the creature to Dreadmount — its place of birth and eventual cage —, the knight stated that for as long as his lineage was enthroned, the dragon would remain incarcerated, confined by the holy chains forged by his sacred blood.

However, although that is the version most people know of, there is an underlying truth which was kept hidden for centuries: it was Cleolind, the princess, who actually

[1] In short, a country is terrorized by a dragon, so the population decides to randomly select children in order to serve as human sacrifice and satiate the creature's hunger, and eventually the princess herself is sorted. As she waits for her doom, a knight shows up and saves her, capturing the dragon and announcing he will only kill it if the entire country converts to Christianity, which everyone complies with. For more details, read *The Origins of the Cult of Saint George* by Christopher Walter (1995).

slayed the dragon. Determined to rid her lands of The Nameless One's flames, she was ready to face it when Galian showed up and proposed to her, not only offering his hand in marriage, but expecting her people to convert to his religion presupposed by knighthood. She declined it all and sent him away, but as stubborn as he was, Galian fought The Nameless One either way when it appeared, injuring himself and ultimately fleeing. In that moment, Cleolind reached for Ascalon, the magical sword the knight had wielded, followed the creature to a valley and fiercely battled the dragon. The Nameless One's flames were, nevertheless, too powerful, so the princess dragged herself across the grass, trying to regain her strength, and took shelter in a magnificent orange tree. When the dragon attempted to burn Cleolind, then, the tree's branches protected her. Enchanted, she picked an orange and took a bite, now possessing the wonderful powers of a mage. She battled The Nameless One once more, burying Ascalon deep into its scales, and forever banished it from her lands. When she came back to her people, Cleolind returned Ascalon to Galian, who, humiliated and jealous, retreated to his country and distorted the story, stealing her feat and painting himself as the hero. That forgotten truth is only known to the residents of the Priory of the Orange Tree, a secret society located on the valley Cleolind originally fought The Nameless One. After being successful in her mission, the princess decided to leave with her ladies-in-waiting and form a matriarchal community, blessed by the fruit of the orange tree, whose goal was to protect the world from any draconic beings. How The Nameless One truly was bound to Dreadmount unfortunately became lost history.

Therefore, now that some part of the worldbuilding is contextualized, we turn to Eadaz, who is a member of the Priory. When the book starts, Eadaz is a mage and works as a spy in Inys' court, observing and protecting queen Sabran Berethnet III. As more and more wyrms and other draconic creatures are spotted, and the ancient order is gradually more and more disrupted, the Priory decides to send an experienced mage to look after Inys' queen. Thus, because Eadaz herself is a narrator, it is possible to witness the many facets of the mage's heroism in this particular setting. Her very first appearance in the novel, on page 11 in chapter 2, revolves around her secretly guarding Sabran's chambers and stabbing an intruder who was sent there to murder the queen. Also, it is important to bear one important aspect in mind: considering that Eadaz and her sisters from the Priory are the only ones who know the truth about Galian Berethnet, they have nicknamed him *The Deceiver* and view him as nothing but a liar; however, Inys is intransigent with other creeds, looking upon any outsider as a heretic. Therefore, as she moves around Sabran's

court, Eadaz pretends to be a devotee to Galian's religion, hiding her true beliefs (the Priory worships Cleolind's image as *The Mother*), powers and fighting abilities, so as to not raise suspicion. For that reason, she cannot openly act as Sabran's bodyguard, thus protecting her from the shadows.

There are two points important to highlight in this initial discussion on Eadaz's character: her very existence as a black woman can on itself be considered a subversion. As it was previously mentioned, when J.R.R. Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, there was an uproar in the publishing market. While they chased after the success of Tolkien's masterpiece, various editors attempted to replicate the professor's (as it was considered) formula, demanding epic high fantasy novels particularly medievalistic from authors, as Dan Sinykin discusses in his article *The Man Who Invented Fantasy* (2023). He writes about the editors Lester del Rey and Judy-Lynn del Rey who, seeing the potential in the growing market of high fantasy books, essentially popularized its most mainstream narrative framings. Thereby, for the del Reys, literary fantasy would basically consist of "[…] original novels set in invented worlds in which magic works. Each would have a male central character who triumphed over the forces of evil [...] by innate virtue, and with the help of a tutor or tutelary spirit" (Sinykin, 2023, n.p.). Exclusionary by essence, such a formula naturally does not contemplate women, but because of Tolkien's association with classic and medieval literature, those themes entailed the ostracism of people of color as well. In her article *My Feminist Call to Historical Fantasy* (2019a) for Ms. Magazine, Samantha Shannon touches on this subject. As high fantasy started to be strictly linked with medievalism, its aesthetic, poetics and culture, the general public also began confusing fiction with reality, accusing high fantasy novels that included people of color or women in powerful positions of being "historically inaccurate". Thus, an ironic dichotomy was born in these communities: dragons, magic and mermaids were accepted, but black women were too unrealistic. And the reasoning was almost always the same — since, theoretically, women of color did not actively participate in Europe's Middle Ages or in Ancient Greece, they should also not have the right to live in secondary worlds that possess absolutely no obligation to the primary world's factual history. Thus, a loyalty to a canon that does not exist is founded and crystallized in high fantasy literature, for decades upholding the exclusion, marginalization and, at best, when they were actually featured, the dehumanization of black women.

> Certain fantasy enthusiasts appear to believe with near-religious fervor that even in fictional worlds, the oppressed must remain oppressed. Any

> attempt to do otherwise is evidence of liberal fragility, box ticking, the sanitization of history or the shoehorning of unwelcome "politics" into entertainment. These are people who seem willing to bend over backwards to ensure that minorities never hold power, even in imagined realms, using history as their shield (Shannon, 2019a, n.p.).

In light of this, one of the main reasons why *The Priory of the Orange Tree* was considered a landmark on feminist high fantasy is precisely because Shannon makes no effort in mirroring our primary world's brutal history; therefore, she does not include violent or scopophiliac depictions of rape, for example. Eadaz, thence, thrives in her womanhood, blackness and lesbianism, never at once being discriminated against for those features, and still being widely praised and recognized as a heroine. Moving forward, another important aspect to note about her first depiction is her secrecy. It is interesting to notice how Shannon makes reference in Eadaz's initial appearance to the many instances in which women across literature and myth, in order to be heroic, had to disguise their own identities — most of the time posing as men. In fact, not only heroines (in the Campbellian/Tolkienian fantasy-related sense of the word), but a great number of female protagonists who sought to escape the hegemonic norm had to, in some capacity, masquerade. Shakespeare, for example, is quite famous for masking his women, as seen in *As You Like It* with Rosalind, who crossdresses as Ganymede; in *Twelfth Night* with Viola, who becomes Cesario; and in *The Merchant of Venice* with Portia, who pretends to be a male lawyer. And, of course, when it comes to heroines, there is the *Ballad of Mulan*, which tells the story of a young girl who crossdressed in order to be accepted by the Chinese army and ultimately saved her country; and finally, the most popular example in high fantasy literature: Éowyn, from *The Lord of the Rings*, who disguised herself as a man and fought the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, defeating and killing the Witch-King of Angmar, Lord of the Nazgûl.

Now, Eadaz does not technically conceal her identity and embodies a male persona: she hides because she fears religious intolerance and because the rules of the Priory forbid foreigners to know of the orange tree or that its residents are mages. Besides, because Shannon's secondary world is completely free of any kind of prejudice or bigotry, patriarchy (or just plain misogyny, racism, homophobia etc.) simply does not exist. Meaning that if Eadaz was a native from Inys, she could have taken on positions as a knight/fighter/bodyguard/soldier or any other traditionally male job with no repercussions, since gender roles are nonexistent in this diegeses. However, when it

comes to the hegemonic rule of our primary world, Shannon skillfully takes advantage of her patriarchy-free universe and, while she conceives extremely multifaceted women not tormented by sexism, she still at times hits back at the genre's exclusionary tradition, criticizing certain dogmas and hierarchies. Along these lines, the author establishes a connection here to the many instances in literature or even in real life when women had to masquerade as men in order to be heroes, and since Eadaz performs a culturally/traditionally male role (of a protector) in that particular context, she is indeed assuming a male persona, even if subtle.

Hiding a crucial part of her identity, therefore, causes the mage significant cognitive dissonance and pain. And this characterization becomes even more relevant when one takes into account the broader context of Eadaz being a black woman, forced to disguise her powers and true strength. Fox (2023, p. 8) in *Black Girl Magic: History, Identity, and Spirituality in Contemporary Fantasy and Science-Fiction* explains that because "[…] black women have struggled to form secure identities under oppressive systems that silence, exploit and abuse them", when it comes to the more specific niche of fantasy literature, there is a long history in this subgenre of black women being erased or simply stereotyped/dehumanized, as it was previously discussed, hindering their sense of Self. And in secondary worlds that mimic the patriarchy and its racist roots, it is extremely common to find black women being portrayed as excessively masculine or even as animals, as if they were never even women in the first place, for example the Calormen women from the book *The Horse and His Boy* (1954) by C.S. Lewis; or Kurtz's African mistress from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Herein, Hirst (2018, p. 41) states: "[…] while white women might find it empowering to see themselves as strong and tough, for black women it can be just as subversive and feminist to be soft and feminine". Thus, it is interesting to notice how Shannon contrives a black female protagonist who, unplagued by oppressive traditions that would have interfered with her self-esteem and self-expression if she were born in our primary world, empowers herself both in her own gentleness and her tenacity. Subverting ancient tropes of black women being objectified, like the Amazons of Greek mythology or the Saracen women of chivalric romance, Shannon presents a black heroine who symbolically adverts to both Achilles and Penelope.

Eadaz's heroism at times is portrayed in a so-called classical manner: she is an amazing swordswoman, archer and fighter. She knows how to ride varied animals, is terribly skilled with blades and conjures her magic as if it were an extension of her very

body. At the same time, Eadaz is profoundly quick-witted, compassionate and kind. The mage represents an anchor for Queen Sabran when the latter loses her child and suffers horrible grief, precisely because of her tender, soft words and sweet demeanour. In many instances, she alludes to characters like Scheherazade, Esther and Elisa (who, according to Tatar, are some of the best examples of feminine heroism in literature), because of her patience, loyalty and cleverness. Of course, as any rounded protagonist, Eadaz is firstly introduced as flawed: in the first chapters, she could often be close-minded and even stubborn, but as the plot moves forward, the mage understands the world around her more deeply, forming true bonds with the people she had previously belittled for worshipping the one she deemed as *The Deceiver*. And in the end, Eadaz herself wields Ascalon and stabs The Nameless One when it returns. Not to mention that, despite being a mighty warrior, the mage shows mercy when she defeats one of the main villains of the novel (besides The Nameless One): the witch Kalyba, and even returns the antagonist's body to her birthplace, showcasing nothing but respect and forgiveness.

Thus, Shannon does not sacrifice any part of Eadaz's personality or journey in order to be in accordance with a specific archetype or problematic tradition. The protagonist is whole, she incorporates culturally masculine and feminine traits, and since such concepts do not even exist in the author's secondary world, Eadaz does not conform to any gender roles that might have constrained her heroism. Instead, she simply exists, and she is heroic. Such characterization echoes Funck's (2016, p. 35) theories on an approach many feminist authors (especially poets) employ, which she describes as *antimythological*: "[…] to build a new self-awareness, the contemporary writer must not only cut ties with the values perpetuated by repetitive traditional narratives, but also transcend the destructive ideologies that she herself has internalized"[2]. Thereupon, Eadaz represents this subversion of the norm — a heroine Shannon locates at the center of her plot who, in the past, would have never been considered eligible to slay the dragon in a Saint George and the Dragon narrative framework. By doing so, the author also connects her novel with Tatar's (2021) considerations on feminist retellings, in which writers bring back silenced women and shine a light on their forgotten stories, a strategy widely seen in contemporary fantasy literature which very often resignifies the past and resurrects

[2] In the original language: "[...] para construir uma nova consciência de si mesma, a escritora contemporânea deve não apenas cortar os laços com os valores perpetuados pela repetição de narrativas tradicionais, mas, também, transcender as ideologias destrutivas que ela própria internalizou" (Funck, 2016, p. 35).

heroines, for example in April Genevieve Tucholke's *The Boneless Mercies* (2018), a retelling of *Beowulf*; and in Sangu Mandanna's *A Spark of White Fire* (2018), a retelling of *Mahābhārata*. Such a concept, of bringing back forsaken/marginalized women, is exceptionally important for Tatar (2021, p. 37-38) because it reminds the general public that a story has many perspectives, and that "[…] silencing does not foreclose possibilities for heroic action".

Moving forward, one particularly important worldbuilding feature seen (and already mentioned) in *The Priory of the Orange Tree* is its lack of misogyny. Osterhaus (1987, p. 19) in *The Female Hero: An Analysis of Female Protagonists in Modern Epic High Fantasy Novels* argues that "[…] as most fictional women are presently understood, the female hero is an aberration. [...] Female heroes, because they are heroes, display autonomy — a trait not normally present or valued in fictional women". In other words, as long as female characters in fantasy literature embody masculine traits and align themselves with classic and deterministic notions of what makes a hero, they will be viewed as outsiders, as the Other. Therefore, eradicating those paradigms from the very foundation of their diegesis is crucial for removing women from the marginalized position of a heroic Other, as discussed by Funck (2016, p. 176[3]) and her theories on utopian feminist novels. The Brazilian scholar reasons that "[…] feminist utopia provides positions for women through the liberation of culturally constructed gender identities", allowing these characters to therefore build *new* identities.

Eadaz is not a racist caricature such as the Mammy, the Jezebel or the Sapphire (Fox, 2023); she is not overtly passive and adjacent to a male hero, serving as an archetypal crutch that will only represent a step in his journey and nothing more (Bernárdez, 2020); and she is not excessively/pejoratively masculine and constantly dehumanized to a point her personhood is stripped, becoming a walking fetishized stereotype (Hirst, 2018). Eadaz is a mage, a fighter, a leader, a friend, a lover, and most importantly, she is a heroine. Bernárdez theorizes that, maybe, that is Shannon's greatest subversion, she centers her female characters as plot pivots, not making any differentiation or highlighting their gender, race or sexuality as anomalous factors. "While it may not make a strong, conscious, overt political statement for inclusivity, Shannon's work achieves normalization, and that is perhaps the most political statement of all" (Bernárdez, 2020, p. 97). Therefore, Eadaz follows quite a classic Campbellian

[3] In the original language: "[...] a utopia feminista proporciona posicionamentos para as mulheres, por meio de uma liberação das identidades de gênero culturalmente construídas" (Funck, 2016, p. 176).

hero's journey, with a proper call to adventure, a crossing of threshold and an extremely complex road of trials. In chapter 9, for instance, she protects Queen Sabran from Fýredel, The Nameless One's fiercest and most ruthless servant — a huge dragon, whose wings spanned 30 to 60 meters and who had teeth longer than swords. It tried to burn the queen on top of The Alabastrine Tower, but Eadaz braided a rope of magic around Sabran, essentially saving her life.

> As Fýredel unleashed his fire, so Ead broke the chains on her long dormant power. Flame collided with ancient stone. Sabran vanished into light and smoke. [...] She felt the strain on her braids of protection around the queen, the fire clawing for dominance, the pain in her own body as the warding gulped away her siden. Sweat soaked her corset. Her arm shook with the effort of keeping her hand turned outward (Shannon, 2019b, p. 114-115).

On a more intimate sphere, Eadaz sees herself forced to fight her growing feelings for Queen Sabran, but as the two of them become closer and closer, such a task gets more and more challenging (Eadaz and Sabran's relationship will be analysed in more detail in the subsequent section). Because it is believed in the Queendom of Inys that the Berethnet bloodline is what keeps The Nameless One imprisoned, and therefore, what keeps the peace, Sabran is extremely pressured to wed and get pregnant, which oftentimes makes her feel dehumanized, as if she were an object, a tool with a sole purpose that could be discarded after being used. Eadaz, then, knows her duty, knows they can never be together and despite her feelings, still courageously do as she was told by the Prioress. Yet she yearns.

To contextualize the next example, Sabran gives way to the pressure and finds a fiancé, however she still openly and defiantly declares how terrified she truly is of pregnancy. On her wedding night, Eadaz, as a lady-in-waiting, prepared the queen's bed and, out of empathy, placed a rose on top of her pillow to soothe Sabran's uneasiness.

> 'The rose smelled beautiful, Mistress Duryan'.
> Sabran slid her fingers between hers. Thinking she meant to say more, Ead leaned down to hear—but instead, Sabran Berethnet kissed her on the cheek.
> Her lips were soft as swansdown. Gooseflesh whispered all over Ead, and she fought the need to let out all her breath.
> 'Thank you,' Sabran said. 'It was generous.' [...]
> 'It was my pleasure, madam' (Shannon, 2019b, p. 249).

Loving the queen of Inys as much as she did, therefore, became Eadaz's greatest pain when she had to flee the country in the middle of the night, after being accused of witchcraft, and leave Sabran. She traveled day and night in order to return to the Priory, and had to ultimately go through a deep transformation and ego restructuring after finding out that the Prioress was corrupt. Eadaz sorrowfully but bravely battled her own sisters, as she realized that her blindness would mean abandoning the rest of the world to be destroyed by The Nameless One's flames. So she sacrifices all she was taught her whole life and fights for what is right, seeking for help in places the Prioress would have never allowed her. In the end, Eadaz showcases one of the noblest traits of a hero: she is mature and humble enough to overcome her own pride in order to save others, and in the process, the mage loses herself in countless instances — or at least who she thought she was —, but Eadaz is also persevering enough to find herself again, time after time. She visits Kalyba alone in a moment when the witch looked like the only one who had answers (p. 459); even when chased by her sister after escaping the Priory, she shows compassion and saves her from an attacking wyrm (p. 502); cleverly dissolves the plot against Sabran with the help of her two dear friends, Loth and Margret (p. 525); protects and saves Margret's life from Kalyba, when the two met again after Eadaz went looking for the lost sword of Ascalon (p. 591); showcases enough sensibility and discernment to recognize they should ask for help across the ocean, on the other side of the hemisphere, among those who were considered the most heretic of all (p. 605); helps Sabran understand that she is more than a sacred womb, she is a leader and a warrior (p. 613); and in the end, when The Nameless One is defeated and all is well, Eadaz returns to the Priory as a heroine and as the Prioress (p. 796).

To sum things up, by not comprehending misogynistic and racist narratives in her worldbuilding, and by just letting her female characters *be*, Shannon designs a hero and a protagonist exceptionally well-rounded, complex and utterly human, who in this case, happens to be black and a woman.

> The voice of the Nameless One.
> *I know your name, Eadaz uq-Nāra. My servants have whispered it in voices filled with dread. They speak of a root of the orange tree, a root that can stretch far into the world and still burn golden as the sun.*
> *I am the handmaiden of Cleolind, serpent.* Somehow she knew how to speak to him. *This night I will complete her work* (Shannon, 2019b, p. 781. Original emphasis).

2 My heart knows your song, as yours knows mine

Another integral part of Eadaz's character (as well as Sabran's) is her relationship with the Queen of Inys. The fact that they are a lesbian couple is, too, in itself, a subversion. In literature and myth, it is not unusual to find heroines, or simply women who did not bow to patriarchal expectations and diverged beyond the traditionally feminine, and were, in a way, punished because of that through marriage. For example, the Greek heroine Atalanta, who was raised by bears and could run faster than any man or living being. It was prophesied that marriage would be her undoing, so she chose to stay in the woods, stating that (as her father insisted that she'd wed) she would only accept a groom who could outran her. Hippomenes, wishing to marry Atalanta, asked Aphrodite for help, and in their race, tricked the heroine. In short, she kept her word and they did marry, but because Hippomenes forgot to thank Aphrodite, the goddess bewitched them to have sex in Zeus' sanctuary, and for the sacrilege, they were turned into lions. Another trope usually seen in myth and literature is women being "tamed" by a husband or a male figure. For instance, the character Faile from Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*, who used to be hot-headed and opinionated and constantly argued with her partner Perrin, became gracious and complaisant after severe torture and an attempted rape; or J. R. Ward's *The Black Dagger Brotherhood*, in which there is Xhex, a woman that is not very feminine and has deep independence as a warrior, gets imprisoned, raped, emotionally tortured, and repeatedly violated, which of course tames Xhex's independency and feminizes her for her eventual husband John Matthew; and finally, even if quite old and not particularly detailed, there is the character Modthryth, from the epic poem *Bewoulf*, who is depicted as being a wicked queen before getting married, but then, she turns into a benevolent princess.

Eadaz's journey, therefore, as it was previously seen, encompasses a myriad of heroic actions that range from traditionally feminine to masculine, and the mage is not punished or "tamed" by a heterosexual man in any capacity. In light of this, Eadaz and Sabran's relationship also becomes especially relevant when one analyses Campbell's considerations on the rare occasions we have a heroine, instead of a hero. While discussing the seventh step of the hero's journey, "The Meeting with the Goddess" (2004), the author writes about an integral part of a hero's path to subjectivity, that is the encounter with a feminine figure who will guide him towards a specific objective and

frequently represents his own *anima* (summarily, in Jungian psychology, all men possess a feminine side, *anima*; and all women possess a masculine side, *animus*. They are usually repressed in every person's subconscious mind and theoretically represent characteristics traditionally innate to each sex). In view of this, about the seventh step and a female protagonist, Campbell (2004, p. 109-110) writes:

> And when the adventurer, in this context, is not a youth but a maid, she is the one who, by her qualities, her beauty, or her yearning, is fit to become the consort of an immortal. Then the heavenly husband descends to her and conducts her to his bed—whether she will or no. And if she has shunned him, the scales fall from her eyes; if she has sought him, her desire finds its peace.

Besides the overriding of the heroine's consent, which implicates an ontological need to lie with said "heavenly husband" and is in essence problematic, it is also possible to very clearly discern the guiding and apparently indispensable heteronormativity of this seventh step. In *From Girl to Goddess: The Heroine's Journey through Myth and Legend* (2010), Frankel writes about some misogynistic aspects of literature and myth when it comes to heroines, and she touches on the subject of this imperative *animus* too. Although such relation and duality are not always detrimental to the heroine's sense of Self and the couple might inspire in each other mutual partnership and strength (as, arguably, Psyche and Eros), Frankel highlights that in many cases, the woman loses her own identity to her *animus*, on account of the power imbalance present in the relationship (2010). We have, therefore, a paradoxical norm, in which it is theorized that a woman will only be a completed individual after she lies and accepts the celestial male figure, but at the same time, by doing so, she will also sacrifice her selfhood in order to accommodate the *animus* who canonically strips her of any free will, control or even a voice — for example, Guinevere, Persephone, and Iseult, who are generally characterized as nothing but wives. Thence, Frankel claims that, in the forging of a feminist rhetoric in fantasy (or any myth-adjacent literature), in which the heroine's identity is not inevitably connected to the incorporation of a male figure, it is necessary to dismantle the very notion that dictates the sovereignty of the *animus*.

"This *animus* must be torn apart piece by piece in order to let the heroine reconstitute herself as female, without her earlier dependence on the masculine side. Thus she learns to stand alone" (Frankel, 2010, p. 253). It is interesting, therefore, to notice how, when it comes to Sabran and Eadaz's relationship, there is no *animus*. If one were

to consider Sabran as *the Goddess* Campbell speaks of, she represents a central figure in Eadaz's path who inspires her strength and gentleness. However, at the same time, Sabran also goes through her own personal heroine's journey throughout the novel, learning how to overcome difficulties and restructure her own sense of self as it is destroyed (specially by grief and treason) again and again. In those moments, Eadaz is the one inspiring strength and gentleness in the queen. Shannon, therefore, designs a relationship that completely excludes men and even the notions of an obligatory male/*animus* figure, contriving a lesbian couple who stimulate each other's sensitivity/bravery/rationality in a self-sufficient manner, independent of mythological androcentrism and without stereotypical distinction that could refer to any gender roles. In light of this, it is also important to consider that although homophobia or systemic heteronormativity do not exist in Shannon's secondary world, due to Sabran's cultural and political obligation to bear a daughter and, as it is believed across Inys, protect the people from The Nameless One, who would escape in case she did not, the queen is indeed subjugated by a heteronormative norm. For that, Sabran complies and marries a man even though she feels nothing for him, but he dies in a terrorist attack before the first half of the book (Shannon, 2019b).

Thankfully, the queen became pregnant before the death of the prince consort, which for the people and the court, was all that mattered. This instance too touches on the subject of dehumanization: Sabran is viewed as a holy uterus, and no one but Eadaz sympathizes for her and realizes that despite not loving the prince consort as a husband, the queen was not indifferent to him as a friend, and his death did pain her. In this context, among immense pressure and borderline cruelty, Eadaz stays with Sabran during her grief, assisting her during the queen's initial stages of pregnancy while validating her conflicting feelings and fears on motherhood. When Sabran expresses she feels selfish for being scared of what will come now that the prince consort is dead, as the Queendom's security gets more and more fragile by the day, Eadaz replies:

> 'Where I come from,' Ead said, 'we would not call it selfish to do as you have done.'
> Sabran looked at her.
> 'You have just lost your companion. You are carrying his child. Of course you feel vulnerable.' Ead pressed her hand. 'Childing is not always easy. It seems to me that this is the best-kept secret in all the world. We speak of it as though there were nothing sweeter, but the truth is more complex. No one talks openly about the difficulties. The discomfort. The uncertainty. So now you feel the weight of your

> condition, you believe yourself alone in it. And you have turned the blame upon yourself.'
> At this, Sabran swallowed.
> 'Your fear is natural.' Ead held her gaze. 'Let no one convince you otherwise.'
> For the first time since the ambush, the Queen of Inys smiled (Shannon, 2019b, p. 330-331).

Confronting the norm and the oppressive rule Sabran has lived since her birth, her romantic relationship with Eadaz, as Funck (2016, p. 161)[4] theorizes, represents a counteraction against that norm: "[...] lesbianism is seen as a metaphorical space for the rejection of various hegemonic practices, such as the patriarchal nuclear contract and romantic ideology. Therefore, it becomes 'a way of rejecting patriarchy, an act of resistance'".

Now, when it comes to patriarchy or deterministic norms, it is also interesting to mention bell hooks' notions on love that she writes about in her book *All About Love: New Visions* (2001). The foundations of a hegemonic society of any shape, she states, necessarily socialize "[…] everyone to believe that in all human relations there is an inferior and a superior party, one person is strong, the other weak, and that it is therefore natural for the powerful to rule over the powerless" (Hooks, 2001, p. 97). In this case, it could be argued that, at least in the beginning, there was some power imbalance in Eadaz and Sabran's relationship. Even in the most utopian of worlds, Sabran's position as a monarch would still represent an immense privilege. And because she is the ruler of a Queendom that actively looks down upon Eadaz's faith, at first, there is indeed a relation of ruler and follower. However, as it was exposed and revealed that Eadaz was actually a secret mage, the heroine makes no effort in masking her own religious inclinations anymore, and in chapter 53, they both openly dismantle that initial power imbalance. Forced to hide her true feelings, when Eadaz fled in the middle of night and subsequently came back to Inys, she returned clearly intending to wear no more masks around the court. Sabran, however, felt hurt when she discovered that Eadaz was covertly sent there to watch and guard her: during most of her life, she had been manipulated and lied to, about her mother's death, the movements in her Queendom, her very religion and even that her daughter would keep The Nameless One imprisoned (these are all parts of the novel's

[4] In the original language: "[...] o lesbianismo é visto como um espaço metafórico para a rejeição de várias práticas hegemônicas, como o contrato nuclear patriarcal e a ideologia romântica. Torna-se, assim, 'um modo de rejeitar o patriarcado, um ato de resistência'" (Funck, 2016, p.161).

lore that, unfortunately, cannot be deeply explored in this article alone; but, in short, as the plot progresses, the characters discover that the Berethnet lineage was actually not what kept the mighty dragon incarcerated). Because of this, most of all, Sabran fears that what Eadaz and herself lived was just another part of the mage's mission, that she had been used. "Nothing in my life was real. Even the attempts to take my life were staged, designed to influence and manipulate me. But you, Ead — I believed you were different" (Shannon, 2019b, p. 560). In that moment, not only is Sabran stepping down from the crown and speaking to Eadaz as an equal, as a lover who was hurt, but the mage herself replies when the queen demands an answer and actively addresses the matter, simultaneously validating Sabran's feelings and establishing them as equals. "'Answer me,' Sabran said, voice straining. 'I am your queen.' 'You may be *a* queen, but you are not *my* queen. I am not your subject, Sabran.' Ead stepped inside and shut the doors. 'And that is why you can be certain that what was between us was real'" (Shannon, 2019b, p. 560. Original emphasis).

Naturally, on the other side of the coin, there is also Eadaz's characterization as a mage and a fighter, which align her with more traditionally/culturally masculine roles in her own heroism. In view of this, there was a risk of Sabran being portrayed as some sort of prize for her. Since in many heroic tales in myth and legend we find women who were basically gifted to the protagonists as a reward for their heroism, but completely lacked agency; for example Andromeda and Perseus, Deianeira and Heracles, Iole and, again, Heracles, and in some versions, Guinevere and Arthur. In *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, on the other hand, it does not happen. As Bernárdez (2020, p. 98) affirms, Eadaz and Sabran's relationship "[…] is painted as the natural consequence of their closeness and mutual honesty and trust, rather than as the fair reward for Ead's heroics". Without the constraints of gender roles and a deterministic male-female relation that could have implicated one of them being stereotyped on that specific basis — and as bell hooks argues that this is not sustainable on the long run for any healthy couple, their love story is not plagued by any kind of rhetoric implying inferior-superior roles.

> 'You remember the first day we walked together. You told me about the lovejay, and how it always knows its partner's song, even if they have been long apart,' Ead whispered to her. 'My heart knows your song, as yours knows mine. And I will always come back to you' (Shannon, 2019b, p. 615).

Concluding remarks

After these reflections, it can be observed that Eadaz is a hero in every sense of the word, and although her reality does not subjugate her, there is significance and subversion in her existence as a black and lesbian heroine. Betz (2011, p. 116), in *The Lesbian Fantastic: A Critical Study of Science Fiction, Fantasy, Paranormal and Gothic Writings* (2011), states that there is a particular power to lesbian fantasy, as it "[…] suggests that the ideal realm is one that not only accepts but also encourages individuals to discover the totality of their identity". Eadaz and Sabran's relationship, more than a love story, also represents a facet of the heroism of them both, and actively influences the novel's happy ending and restoration of peace. Thus, instead of being simply depicted as a parallel story to the main plot or an additional characteristic to her character, Eadaz's lesbianism is crucial for understanding who she is as a person and as a heroine, since it shapes her sense of self, moral compass and even growth. For that reason, Betz believes that a lesbian heroine has the potential of questioning the very idea of a hero's journey, as her existence diverges from the traditional Campbellian path and in many ways, subverts classic norms on subjectivity.

> The initial motive for this character's taking up a quest may reflect needs or demands of others, but her search for a clear sense of identity is intricately tied to the heroic adventure, and in linking these two goals, the authors subvert the idea of becoming or being a hero. Discovering that one's identity can be shaped by oneself and that the expression of one's erotic and emotional desires for another woman is an intrinsic part of that self-imaging gives the character the ability to pursue the original quest (Betz, 2011, p. 127).

In conclusion, Samantha Shannon contrives Eadaz, a heroine who subverts multitudinous archetypes and traditional fantasy pathways, as she represents one of the central reasons why the novel is considered a feminist retelling of Saint George and the Dragon. As the author positions women as Subject and not Other, she questions the hegemonic norm and can even go beyond, creating a protagonist who challenges the notions of what even makes a hero.

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