

“Little Girls are Even More Perfect When They Bleed”: Monstrosity, Violence, and the Female Body in Kristin Cashore’s Graceling Trilogy”

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This article examines concepts of humanity, monstrosity, and female agency in Kristin Cashore’s recent Graceling trilogy of fantasy novels for young adults. In particular, the teenage protagonists of *Graceling* (2008), *Fire* (2009) and *Bitterblue* (2012) struggle to resist and to reconfigure their societies’ conservative systems of prejudice, fear, desire, difference, and violence regarding “natural” and “unnatural” female bodily experience. Cashore’s trilogy interrogates traditional concepts of normal and aberrant female embodiment and offers thought-provoking opportunities for personal and collective transformation.

The fantastic world of Kristin Cashore’s young-adult Graceling trilogy is embedded in an interplay of fear, desire, and ambivalence around ideas of what it means to be human and what it is to be a monster. The teenage female protagonists of *Graceling* (2008), *Fire* (2009), and *Bitterblue* (2012) strive to navigate their societies’ systems of prejudice and violence and to



challenge hegemonic boundaries between the “human” and the “unnatural.” Many critics of young-adult literature would agree that “adolescent fiction is pivotally preoccupied with the formation of subjectivity—that is, the development of notions of selfhood” (Bradford et al. 212). The hybrid nature of the young adult and its evolving position within the continuum of childhood and adulthood holds great promise

for personal and collective transformation. This fluidity affords exciting possibilities for resistance, expansion, and creative re-invention of how agency is conceptualized and negotiated. However, young adults are also vulnerable to the burdens and risks of inhabiting this borderland territory which resists being fully disciplined and classified. As Nuzum observes, “The adolescent is not quite child, not quite adult.... They are, in a sense, beings without status, without a rightful place in society—just like a monster” (210).

Monsters, norms, and female embodiment

Cashore’s Graceling trilogy examines this nexus of identity, agency, and the teenage female body and interrogates the capacity of young-adult fantasy to interrogate and reformulate traditionally gendered systems of power, norms, violence, shame, and prejudice. One of the central themes of the Graceling novels is the problematizing of concepts of difference and monstrosity, especially around representations of female “aberration.” These notions of normal and abnormal are deeply situated within bodily experiences. Much scholarship has been dedicated to studying the mediation of gender conventions within fantastic literature, especially the genre’s potential for re-visioning traditional power relations and binary constructions of masculine/feminine, reason/emotion, civilization/ wilderness, order/chaos, etc. Through the journeys of her three young protagonists—whether Graced, monstrous, or human—and their struggles across the trilogy to understand themselves and their aberrant lineages and abilities, Cashore questions the regulatory lines which traditionally and reassuringly

differentiate civilized humans from mutant creatures.

Elaine Graham argues that “monsters serve both to mark the fault-lines but also, subversively, to signal the fragility of such boundaries. They are truly ‘monstrous’—as in things shown and displayed—in their simultaneous demonstration and destabilization of the demarcations by which cultures have separated nature from artifice, human from non-human, normal from pathological” (12). In Cashore’s story world, Gracelings, such as Katsa (a child-assassin and the protagonist of the trilogy’s first novel), possess differently-colored eyes and “a particular skill far surpassing the capability of a normal human being” (*Fire* 6). They are thus distrusted and stigmatized throughout the Seven Kingdoms. Similarly, in the neighboring kingdom of the Dells, monstrous brightly-colored beasts exist that are regarded both as threat and commodity. The rare “monsters of a human shape” who live there (11), such as Fire (the eponymous protagonist of the second novel) are considered to be even more unnatural yet enthralling. While the heroine of Cashore’s third novel, *Bitterblue*, does not possess any superhuman talents such as a Grace, this young queen is a hybrid child of a normal human mother and a Graceling father, Leck, who tyrannized the kingdom with his power of mind control. *Bitterblue* thus struggles with her own troubling capacity for causing pain to others, the tainted inheritance of her Graceling father and the traumatic effects of his malevolence on herself and also her people.

While “normal” citizens generally regard Gracelings and monster-humans with mingled anxiety and curiosity, the perception of difference as pathologically threat-

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ening and simultaneously fascinating is particularly intense around the representation and mediation of the young female body. Katsa, *Fire*, and *Bitterblue* are haunted by their capability for intentionally and accidentally damaging others and themselves. After discovering her skill at fighting when she accidentally kills a man who assumed he could sexually touch her, Katsa is forced to act as her uncle’s enforcer. The unnatural ability of “a girl Graced with killing” (*Graceling* 7) to overcome older male warriors quickly becomes notorious. She is conscripted at an early age as the ultimate weapon that her uncle can use against his enemies. Katsa’s deceptively young, apparently vulnerable and “innocent” body juxtaposes traditionally masculine and feminine qualities in a disconcerting but irresistible display of monstrous power which both unsettles and attracts all around her. For example, Katsa’s unarmed practices of fighting against older, armed human warriors and other Gracelings are a popular “spectacle” for the royal court (9).

Many critics have explored how the trope of child as monster enacts the disturbing and uncanny threat of this youth’s seemingly harmless and “safe” body. Sabine

Büssing observes the “perverse” irony that “the child’s traditional image as pure, innocent creature also means an advantage in those cases when it acts as a monstrous killer” (xvi). The additional level of dread and horror associated with the destructive force of a *female* child is explored in rich psychological detail in this trilogy. While Katsa’s abilities are ostensibly legitimized in accordance with her uncle’s royal will in order to use them against his enemies, her unnatural and unfeminine martial strength is still widely feared. At the start of the trilogy, Katsa has internalized this systemic apprehension about the inherent nature of Gracelings’ wildness and propensity for destruction. She spends much of the first novel grappling with her desire to abandon self-control and to kill her uncle in retaliation for the brutal acts that he has forced her to commit in his name. She at first manages to achieve a level of control over this temptation towards violence by physically absenting herself from his presence and the court. Later, Katsa sustains a deeper challenge to the culture of fear regarding her Graced fighting abilities by adopting an educational role to help empower “the weakest and most vulnerable of people”

(*Graceling* 287). As part of her resistance work against the tyrannical authority of some male local rulers, she sets up ongoing sessions across the Seven Kingdoms to teach girls and women, including Bitterblue herself, how to physically defend themselves. Katsa gradually learns to synthesize her “wildness” with her heroic leadership role in the resistance movement, and by the end of the first novel, she reaches a transformative epiphany: her true Grace is not for killing but instead for survival and “for life” (183).

Female monsters, desire, and policing the female body

When we first meet Fire at the start of Cashore’s second novel, she is similarly surrounded by ambivalence about her destructive and creative potential. The ambiguous nature of human monsters—in their unsettling juxtaposition of monstrous abilities and human form—challenges conventional regimes of the natural and the unnatural. The bestial qualities attributed to monsters along with the unnerving allure that they possess problematize Fire’s claim to the dignity and rights extended to so-called normal people. In the territory of the Dells, monster bodies are hunted by humans for their desirability, and their corpses are harvested as commodities. Monster feathers are prized as hair decorations, and monster fur and shells are used for ornamenting clothes and jewelry. After all, as Fire angrily reflects, “Everyone wants a bit of something beautiful” (*Fire* 180). Yet the female monster in human shape encounters dangers that monster-beasts and the male human-monster do not. Fire’s monster father, Cansreal, flaunted his flamboyant status and difference throughout his life. He

used to revel in the beguilement he exerted and openly manipulate all around him for his own appetites.

On the other hand, as Fire bitterly notes, “he had been a man. Cansreal had not had her problems” (*Fire* 151). After manipulating Cansreal’s emotions to contrive him into a fatal accident when she was a child, Fire has been conditioned from childhood, and especially puberty, to feel guilt and shame for her mesmeric impact on humans and even on other monsters. The spectacle of her monstrous difference never relents: even when bruised, beaten, or scarred, her body continues to exert its full, devastating sway on anyone perceiving it. The extreme desirability of her body also carries with it another set of problems: monsters are carnivorous and are uncontrollably attracted to the blood of other monsters, especially that of human-monsters. Thus, Fire must hide inside fortresses for the duration of each menstrual cycle, all the while bearing the guilt that her presence endangers everyone around her. Moreover, she is acutely aware that the privacy of her menstrual cycle is compromised as public knowledge since it is all too obvious that she cannot go outside during those times without an armed guard for deflecting the monsters’ assaults.

In a relatively rare example of acknowledging what might be considered the “messy” or “taboo” reality of female bodies in literature for young people, Cashore traces Fire’s intermingled feelings of vulnerability, embarrassment, and frustration with sensitivity and insight. Female production of menstrual fluids, as Julia Kristeva argues, has been widely regarded as a monstrous and abject threat to the patriarchal social order. It is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs

identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). Across the storyverses of fiction for adults and teenagers—whether in scenarios set in the contemporary, “real world” or in imagined, fantastic realms—the vast majority of narratives erase the existence of menstruation. As A. L. Evins states in “The Missing Period: Bodies and the Elision of Menstruation in Young Adult Literature,”

The literary landscape is virtually devoid of representations of menstruation. Even young-adult literature, which targets an audience on the cusp of menarche, is strangely silent on the topic. ... [T]he elision of menstruation signals a persistent devaluation of the female experience. Bloodless literature mimics not a bloodless world, but a bloodless culture, a culture determined to deny a basic bodily reality. (47, 48)

Cashore is therefore to be commended for her direct recognition and frank treatment of this important but suppressed issue, especially in light of the shame conditioning and rape culture in which Fire lives. There is the never-ending threat of sexual violence whenever men’s yearning response to her dazzling appearance and the associated resentment they feel against her influence might curdle into a brutal sense of entitlement and a lust for possession:

For every peaceful man, there was a man who wanted to hurt her, even kill her, because she was a gorgeous thing he could not have.... Why did hatred so often make men think of rape? And there was the flaw in her

monster power. As often as the power of her beauty made one man easy to control, it made another man uncontrollable and mad. A monster drew out all that was vile, especially a female monster, because of the desire, and the endless perverted channels for the expression of malice. (*Fire* 28, 123)

Fire’s life is overshadowed by the possibility of men in proximity to her physical presence claiming that the force of her beauty has overwhelmed them and that they have been therefore “legitimately” compelled to attack and rape her. For example, Nash (her king, the brother of her eventual partner and, as such, a protective authority that she should be able to trust) declares himself overcome by uncontrollable desperation for possessing her. This presumed claim upon her body is based on what he and other characters consider their “natural” right to violate Fire against her will. Even Fire’s own monster father is affected by the gravitational pull of her tantalizing body. Cansreal warns her that even he would not be able to withstand the enticement of her awesome beauty and he might therefore be ostensibly helpless in stopping himself from committing the unnatural acts of incest and rape.

Motherhood and maternal possibilities

As damaging as this unending anxiety is, Fire is devastated by an even more insidious injury to her concept of her own agency and her right to the integrity of her body. She voluntarily chooses to take a monthly system of contraception as a way of maintaining a level of independence during her romance with Archer. Nevertheless, she

torments herself with concerns over becoming a mother in a society where her human-monster progeny would be assailed by hatred, fear, and resentment. Agonizing over the unfairness of the cycle of prejudice that she and any future children she might have seem trapped within, she feels forced to take herbs which render her permanently infertile: “It made Fire so angry, the thought of such a medicine, a violence done to herself to stop her from creating anything like herself” (*Fire* 181).

Katsa and Bitterblue also share Fire’s fear about becoming mothers to children that would be considered deviant or contaminated in some way due to their aberrant lineage. All three protagonists either start the various novels as orphans or become orphaned during the trilogy. A central aspect of their journeys involves their ambivalent relationships with maternal loss, paternal power, and their own capacity for and aversion to becoming parents of abnormal children. Katsa never knew her birth parents and strives to free herself from the patriarchal dominion of her uncle while eventually creating her own family community and becoming a mother-figure to Bitterblue. Both Fire and Bitterblue’s mothers are murdered by their fathers, and they are raised and conditioned according to their fathers’ objectives to become female incarnations of and counterparts to their male parents. Fire dreads passing on her monstrosity to the next generation, and Bitterblue becomes almost obsessively anxious about carrying on her father’s corrupted and corrupting legacy. Meanwhile, Katsa berates herself for her resistance to institutionalized notions of what “normal” young women should desire: “a girl who didn’t want the husbands [her king] Randa

pushed on her, a girl who panicked at the thought of a baby at her breast, or clinging to her ankles. She wasn’t natural” (*Graceling* 24).

The intensity of motherhood and the three protagonists’ maternal potential are significant themes in Cashore’s analysis of female agency and embodiment. Significantly, the only time that Leck’s persuasive power fails occurs when he attempts to create a critical schism between his daughter, Bitterblue, and her mother, Ashen. Leck’s particular predilection is to experiment on female victims, especially “Gracelings, and girls” (Bitterblue 435). He is especially fascinated by these young females’ reproductive power (441). As part of his usual games in distorting people’s minds and memories for his own amusement, he tries to convince Bitterblue and Ashen that they have physically hurt and tortured each other. For the first time, he is unsuccessful. Drawing upon the strength and conviction of the bond between mother and daughter, they are able to withstand him and to refuse the possibility that they are capable of this violent and invasive betrayal of each other. Bitterblue later tells Katsa that “his Grace lost some of its power over me...when he hurt my mother. And it lost some of its power over my mother when he threatened me” (*Graceling* 214). Even so, it is not until the third book in the series, *Bitterblue*, that Cashore’s eponymous heroine fully comes to explore the complexities of this parent-child relationship and the potentially transformative power of the maternal. The culmination of the trilogy focuses on Bitterblue’s efforts to combine her identities as queen, survivor-daughter, and symbolic mother in order to guide and heal her maimed kingdom after the psychic and

physical wounds left by Leck’s reign.

Possibilities for healing and transformation

The final novel in the trilogy investigates the power of the repressed and the possibility of reconciling monstrous knowledge and the trauma arising from violent histories with the possibility for creating and sustaining compassion, acceptance, and social justice. When Leck is killed by Katsa at the end of *Graceling* and Bitterblue is crowned as the new monarch of Monsea, readers might assume that these symbolic acts would automatically result in a repairing of that damaged society. In contrast to this hopeful expectation, there has been little recovery or progress during the eight years between the closure of *Graceling* and the start of *Bitterblue*. The kingdom is still caught within a web of guilt, distorted memories, and secrets about the unspeakable acts that people were forced to commit under Leck’s sadistic rule. The royal council persuaded Bitterblue to use her first decree as queen to erase all crimes committed by any citizen during the period of her father’s regime. This was considered to be necessary by her advisors in order to conceive any chance for personal and collective recuperation and mutual forgiveness and growth. Bitterblue reluctantly agrees to this program of national forgetting since “the abusers were also [Leck’s] victims” (*Bitterblue* 479).

However, this strategy to expunge unforgiveable transgressions and to pretend that corruptions of the last four decades never happened is doomed to failure. Various members of the court are driven to madness, self-mutilation, and even suicide because they are unable to live with their

complicity regarding the persecution and violence that Leck forced them to commit. Bitterblue herself is plagued by uncertainty about her distorted memories and the truth of what actually happened: “What the awful thing is, I don’t know. Father never shows me the things he does, and Mama never remembers enough to tell me” (3). She is further faced with unanswerable questions about the lingering effects of “the rape of her own mind” (19). Bitterblue’s labors to expose the deliberately occluded past and to uncover both her own family story and her people’s experiences are undermined by her country’s desire to escape the pains of the past through forgetting. She also must resolve her own conflicted feelings about the ethical consequences of using her power to force the traumatic process of remembering. As Kim Wilson states, “Memory, in the framework of the collective, is a site of power and the production and mediation of it is a contentious and contested space... Collective memory, then, and its most obvious transmitter, public history, becomes a highly valued and sometimes contested commodity of the nation state” (112). Bitterblue’s need to expose the truth and to challenge the “comfort zone” of her people’s memories thus creates deep tensions between herself and her court regarding what is “natural” and “best” for Monsea and its citizens.

As part of this trajectory towards accommodating and reconstructing the suffering of Monsea’s monstrous past, Bitterblue orders the exposure of Leck’s secret dungeon laboratory, where he forced others to conduct acts of torture, experimentation, and rape. She then orders the collection and articulation of the “mysterious bones” lying at the bottom of the river running through the

capital city (*Bitterblue* 390). This gives the people of the kingdom of Monsea the opportunity to reclaim not just the bodies of their loved ones who were thought to have been lost forever but also the right to articulate the suppressed stories of past atrocities. At the end of the novel, *Bitterblue* is planning to reconfigure her state structures in order to rehabilitate distorted ministries and to create a more trustworthy, accountable, and principled government. Her plans include the establishment of a “Ministry of Stories and Truth” (538), where everyone can record personal histories which had previously been proscribed and too dangerous to name or share.

Alongside these political and social transformations, *Bitterblue* undergoes her own metamorphosis. She gradually learns to negotiate her ambivalence about her unnatural heritage and abnormal childhood and to successfully integrate her identities as adolescent, daughter, queen, mother of her people, and hybrid product of a human mother and Graceling father. This interwoven personal and public transfiguration is symbolized through the sculpture created by Bellamew, a female Graceling artist who was tortured and raped by *Bitterblue*’s father. The statue portrays *Bitterblue* as a heroic child protector, ready to defend her people, and “turning into a castle... Perfect in form and absolutely fierce” (160). *Bitterblue*’s potential for creating inclusive connections and for dissolving divisions between self and other and reactionary notions of difference as threat are further demonstrated by her vision of herself expanding across her capital city and gently encompassing all inhabitants, whether Graced or normal human, within the expansive female embrace of her body politic:

“She could feel every person in the castle, every person in the city. She could hold every one of them in her arms; comfort every one. She was enormous, and electric with feeling, and wise” (513).

Conclusion

Through navigating the complex relationships between female agency, violence, self-conflict, and embodiment, all three protagonists of Cashore’s trilogy explore the possibility of constructively integrating the traditional binaries of the human and the non-human. Ultimately, they succeed in synthesizing their monstrous and human natures to serve as role models for new opportunities of personal and collective transformation. *Katsa* succeeds in transmuting her disturbing aptitude for killing into an empowering drive towards the forces of generation and life, while *Bitterblue* decides that “She could reshape what it meant to be queen, and reshaping what it meant to be queen would reshape the kingdom” (428). Similarly, *Fire* comes to terms with her ambivalence over her monstrous nature and the deviancy of her paternal inheritance and declares her choice of creating a new, uncharted existence which reinvents the relationship between monster and human:

I’m not Cansreal; at every step on this path I create myself. And maybe I’ll always find my own power horrifying, and maybe I can’t ever be what I’d most like to be. But I can stay here, and I can make myself into what I *should* be. (*Fire* 183)

Cashore’s advocacy of the importance of autonomous choice during the project of

adolescent self-construction is committed to the exploration and reimagining of conservative norms, biases, and hierarchies. The trilogy is especially concerned with investigating and questioning concepts of what constitutes normal and aberrant female embodiment and power. As *Bitterblue* observes at the end of the third novel, the ongoing dilemma for everyone—regardless of their origin, heredity, or abilities—is to combine a capacity for monstrous experiences with the ability to act as an agent of inclusive transformation. Cashore’s trilogy concludes with this provocative but optimistic challenge which invites us to reflect what might be possible when we “balance knowing with healing” (537).

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