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Challenging Gender Stereotypes in Holly Black's *The Folk of the Air* Trilogy

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Abstract

Holly Black is a contemporary American author of fantastic fiction. Her trilogy entitled *The Folk of the Air* (2018–2019) is a popular young adult fantasy series centering on Jude Duarte, a mortal girl growing up in a magical land called Faerie. It focuses on Jude's quest of ensuring safety for herself and her family, gaining political power, and, ultimately, becoming the Queen. The heroic quest is entangled with the romance plot, with Jude gradually developing a relationship with Cardan Greenbriar, a prince of Faerie. This chapter focuses on Jude and Cardan and analyzes them as a romance heroine and hero, respectively. It compares Jude both to the prototypical romance heroines and to the strong woman characters found in adventure fantasy. Cardan is primarily examined through Pamela Regis's elaboration of the dangerous hero in need of taming and the sentimental hero in need of healing. Finally, keeping in mind the fantasy aspect of the series, the paper turns to Jude's and Cardan's connection to magic and nature to demonstrate to what extent they confirm or subvert gender stereotypes. It argues that Jude and Cardan partially adhere to the typical characteristics of the heroine and the hero archetypes but never fully conform to the stereotypes associated with them.

Keywords: *Holly Black, The Folk of the Air, gender stereotypes, young adult literature, fantasy literature*

1. Introduction

Holly Black is a popular contemporary author of fantasy, writing for children, young adults, and adults. In recent years, her most successful work has been *The Folk of the Air* series, whose primary narrative spans a trilogy composed of *The Cruel Prince* (2018), *The Wicked King* (2019), and *The Queen of Nothing* (2019). The plot of the series revolves around Jude, a young human woman who was taken to the mythical land of the faeries (variously called Faerie and Elfhame) as a child. Her initial goal is to make a name for herself, become a knight, and prove to herself and to the faeries that she can do everything they can, if not more. An opportunity to become directly involved in Faerie Court politics soon presents itself, and Jude begins to scheme to put her young faerie adopted brother, Oak, on the throne. In the meantime, she installs Cardan, the titular cruel prince, as her puppet king. Besides the trilogy, the narrative also encompasses *The Lost Sisters* (2018), a companion novella told from Jude's twin's point of view, and *How the King of Elfhame Learned to Hate Stories* (2020), a novella focalized through Cardan, partly shedding light on the key events from his life before and during the plot of the trilogy and partly following up on the conclusion of the trilogy itself.¹ In response to the widespread popularity of the series, Holly Black has published some bonus material in special editions of the novels or disseminated it via her newsletter.

Despite its popularity, no systematic research has been conducted on the series.² This paper is, therefore, an attempt to open up a discussion on this series and prompt more research on it. It aims to show that the characterization of Jude and Cardan subverts gender stereotypes. To this end, it analyzes the characters of Jude and Cardan as a romance heroine

¹ For the sake of brevity, the titles will henceforth be shortened to *CP* (*The Cruel Prince*), *WK* (*The Wicked King*), *QoN* (*The Queen of Nothing*), and *KoE* (*How the King of Elfhame Learned to Hate Stories*) in in-text references.

² Previous research on this series seems to be contained to student theses. Namely, Harriet Bentley and Alexandria Gonzales have briefly examined aspects of the series within wider scopes of their respective research.

and hero, respectively. It first compares them to the prototypical characters found in romance narratives, and, in the case of Jude, young adult literature. Finally, considering the fantasy aspect of the series, the analysis focuses on the two characters' connection to magic and nature to determine to what extent they confirm or subvert gender stereotypes.

2. The Strong Woman Character

Stereotypically, a romance heroine is a mosaic of contradictory characteristics. She is "intelligent and strong" (Regis 206), "spirited and independent" but not "pushy or stubborn," "self-reliant" but "sensitive" and "vulnerable," "competent but not entirely certain of her qualities" (Meyer 26). She "must overcome the laws, dangers, and limitations imposed upon" her by society, which ultimately makes her relationship with the hero possible (Regis 29). For the overall plot of *The Folk of the Air*, this means that Jude must fight against the faerie prejudices about human inferiority. As one fey from Cardan's circle explains, "[Humans] are nothing. You barely exist at all. Your only purpose is to create more of your kind before you die some pointless and agonizing death" (CP 156). In Faerie, humans can be consorts (valued for their reproductive abilities, significantly stronger than those of the faeries), artisans, if they are skilled, or servants. The last group is often horribly mistreated, made addicted to faerie fruit, the consumption of which creates a false feeling of happiness and contentment, dims the reason, and molds the human's perceptions to a desired outcome—for example, a human can eat dry leaves but believe to be feasting (CP 10, 55–56, 111). On a personal level, the prejudice against humans is evident in the fact that the council does not take Jude seriously when she is nominally Cardan's seneschal, even though she is actually the one pulling his strings (WK 67, 232). Even when she becomes the Queen, she is still not immediately obeyed (QoN 218). Jude, "done with being weak" (CP 43), strives to make a better life for herself and to be free. In this endeavor, she displays all the proactive characteristics of the romance heroine. She works hard to better the position of mortals in Faerie; she puts

forward laws that “prevent mortals from being tricked into years-long servitude” (*WK* 59) and laws that ensure plentiful wages for those who do enter work-related bargains (*WK* 154). Her fight against the oppressive system, in which the human race is positioned as the disenfranchised one, aligns Jude with contemporary young adult heroines discussed by Jeffrey A. Brown (174). Her societal reform—in which Cardan also actively participates, as will be shown—exhibits her agency and both creates space for her own identity as a human and allows for equality in a relationship with a faerie.

Some authors have argued that, despite their seeming submission to the dominant hero, romance heroines always have the upper hand, conquering their love interests with their love (Owens Malek 74; Donald 81; Phillips 56). However, the more passive characteristics, mentioned above, still feature prominently in the characterization of a romance heroine. Contrastingly, Jude does not display any of the listed passive characteristics. Passivity and the lack of agency go against her greatest desires: to be powerful and always in control (*CP* 25, 87). The cause of this may be seen in her forced subjection to the faeries, which starts with the murder of her parents at the hands of Madoc, who becomes her adoptive father. Jude’s need for control and, by extension, her initial inability to trust Cardan and let go of a part of control in a romantic relationship is one of the major barriers to their relationship. It comes to the forefront in moments of intimacy (*QoN* 201), the only area in which Cardan, in line with the tenets of a typical romance, undoubtedly has the upper hand due to having significantly more experience than Jude (*QoN* 202; Krentz 111). Ultimately, Jude and Cardan work together to overcome the imbalance of power and control, and both fulfil their desires while maintaining agency, without any stereotypical submission finding place in their relationship (*QoN* 204).

The reason for Jude’s definitive agency may lie in the duality of her identity, which blends the traits of a typical romance heroine with elements of adventure fantasy, a genre populated by strong women charac-

ters. Driscoll and Heatwole note that “to counter images of girls’ passivity . . . all forms of action, including the most violent, are made available to contemporary girl heroes” (277). This type of heroine is often criticized for favoring traditionally masculine characteristics, such as resilience, determination, bravery, resourcefulness, and pride (Driscoll and Heatwole 261). Texts with such heroines imply that it is impossible to be a strong proactive woman while also retaining one’s sense of femininity. At first glance, Jude may be characterized as a masculine heroine whose gender performance, “in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 179), subverts the stereotypical expectations of femininity. At the beginning, she wishes to earn her knighthood by honing her swordsmanship instead of simply marrying—she proclaims not to have any interest in marriage (*CP* 10). She longs for “a kind of power, a kind of protection” that knighthood would bring her (*CP* 27). From Madoc, Jude receives a sword made by her real father (*CP* 222), and her chosen profession, as well as the symbolism of the phallic, paternal weapon (Walker 31), place her into a masculine sphere. Due to the fantasy setting, Jude is also allowed to have negative characteristics since “speculative genres make it easier for girls to act violently and remain heroic, as both their skills and the dangers they confront are unchecked by the realism required of other genres” (Driscoll and Heatwole 277). In line with this, Jude’s ambition soon grows and transfigures her “into a powerhouse of control and supremacy” (McDowell); she becomes a kingmaker, Cardan’s seneschal, and, finally, the High Queen who presents herself as dishonorable (*WK* 296; *QoN* 25) and ruthless (*QoN* 224).

Still, while plainly exhibiting the characteristics traditionally conceptualized as masculine, Jude does not resent more feminine notions. Although she does not strive for marriage and “boys are little more than afterthoughts” to her (McDowell), she is not opposed to love, as is seen in her initial relationship with Locke. Additionally, throughout the series, she enjoys comfortable, practical clothes as well as elaborate dresses, and

she is not against being made up. In line with other young adult heroines (see Brown 172), Jude embraces femininity while also being a strong woman character. Furthermore, she does not criticize Oriana, the character most explicitly aligned with the private, traditionally feminine space, for prioritizing motherhood; on the contrary, she praises Oriana's courage (*CP* 294), admires her for her conversation skills (*CP* 39) and opulent dresses (*CP* 167), and channels her demeanor when she wants to be obeyed, modeling her voice and stance on how Oriana would act in a given situation (*WK* 106). Not only is Jude accepting of the priorities of other women but she also combines both traditionally masculine and feminine aspects of identity into one.

Hence, the *Folk of the Air* novels do not emphasize the masculine characteristics to the detriment of feminine ones, which, according to Ames and Burcon, is a common practice that reinforces gender stereotypes in young adult fiction (51). Jude is able to remain a warrior and simultaneously engage with stereotypically feminine values, balancing and choosing her likes and dislikes on her own. In a similar vein, her marriage to Cardan can be seen as the “plot resolution that reinforces conventional notions of gender” (Brown and St. Clair qtd. in Driscoll and Heatwole 263), but the union is presented in a non-stereotypical way. To contextualize, Jude and Cardan get married in a private ceremony, according to the faerie tradition—since faeries cannot go back on their word and deny their marriage, their vows are binding even without witnesses (*WK* 211). During the ceremony, Cardan pays homage to Jude's human heritage by putting a ring on her finger, although “[t]he exchange of rings is not a faerie ritual” (*WK* 307). What is more, the symbolic exchange of rings has already taken place earlier in the series. First, while she has Cardan imprisoned after Dain's coronation, Jude takes his signet ring and, in privacy, slips it on (*CP* 289), foreshadowing both her marriage to Cardan and her future role as the High Queen. Then, Cardan steals her ruby ring to demonstrate his newly-acquired skills at sleight-of-hand (*WK* 97). This is the very ring he later returns to her during the wedding ceremony, per-

haps to play with the notion that, although she is bound to Cardan now, she is still her own person. In this way, their marriage symbolizes their union as lovers, but also as a union between mortals and faeries.

Seemingly, Jude fulfils the typical female goal in a fantasy narrative, which is to get married and ensure the domestic order via a heterosexual union (Rowe 239; Attebery 52).³ This corresponds to the drive of the romance heroine to marry in general (Day 157) and to marry a man of a higher social and/or economic status in particular (Talbot 82). Yet, Jude does not give up her own power. She neither loses her individuality and agency nor is she relegated to domesticity. On the contrary, her power only grows with her ascension as the land begins to fill Jude with her magic (*QoN* 134, 257). All of this shows Jude to be a strong character that functions well within the fantasy narrative and demonstrates that women need not be subdued in order for the romantic story to reach a happy conclusion.

3. The Taming and Healing of the Hero

According to Regis, the hero of a love story may take two main forms—a dangerous hero whom the heroine must tame and a sentimental hero whom she must heal (112–14). Cardan is difficult to classify in those terms since he does not fully fit the description of either. On the one hand, and on a smaller scale, he exhibits the elements of the sentimental hero (Regis 114). As a marginalized member of the royal family, he is burdened by a dark past, but, importantly, he is not at fault for the events in his past or his upbringing (Meyer 27). Namely, his behavior has been shaped by an uncaring father and an openly hostile mother, both of whom only pay attention to him when he is acting out (*WK* 77): “Cardan

³ Karen E. Rowe and Brian Attebery are both discussing women's roles in fairy tales, but parallels can be drawn with fantasy, since much of the latter's structure and motifs comes from the former (Sullivan III 302). The main female character in a fairy tale predominantly serves merely to liquidate the “lack of a bride” of the male hero and does not have a unique role and identity outside of that (Propp 35, 79–80).

dressed in rags, looking to [his mother] . . . for approval, which only came when he was awful. An abandoned prince, weaned on cat milk and cruelty, left to roam the palace like a little ghost” (*WK* 131). Additionally, Cardan falls out of favor with the Court after he is tricked by his brother Dain, who has schemed to present Cardan as the murderer of a beloved courtier (*QoN* 5–6). In Northrop Frye’s terms, Cardan can be named a *pharmakos* or scapegoat, “neither innocent nor guilty”:

He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes. . . . He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence. (41)

Most of all, he is haunted by a prophecy that refers to his inimical rule and hints at his death (*QoN* 2). He must heal from the trauma inflicted by his childhood experiences and accept his own agency within the framework of the prophecy.

On the other hand, Cardan displays some typical characteristics of a romance hero who should be tamed; yet, he is never completely aligned with the stereotype of “the tough, hard-edged, tormented” (Krentz 107–109), “domineering” (Phillips 56) hero on the whole. A typical hero must be in possession of a few more key characteristics regarding his appearance and behavior, which Cardan only partially fulfils. First of all, he is handsome but not “strongly masculine” (Meyer 26), as he should be, since he does not take to traditionally masculine activities, such as sword fighting (*CP* 304–305). In the first novel, Jude still sees him as “too young, too weak, too mean” (*CP* 265). In other words, he is no stereotypical warrior incarnate (Lowell 92). Next, the clothes he wears should display finesse and wealth (Meyer 26; Talbot 81), which Cardan’s extravagant raiment does, but the fact that he frequently wears kohl around his eyes and gold or silver powder on his cheekbones breaks away from the stereotypical ideas about make-up being a domain reserved for women. Furthermore, his position as the prince and, later, the High King, portrays him as the man “in charge” (Meyer 27), a “natural, effortless [leader]”

(Donald 82), but his position remains only nominal until Jude frees him of her control.

Questions of control are prominently featured in the novels and can be related to the romance heroine's purpose of taming or healing of the hero. Jude attempts to tame Cardan by binding him with a vow, which can be understood as a drastic example of subjecting the romance hero to the heroine's will. However, this manner of control proves to be fruitless as Cardan only pretends to enjoy the role of a figurehead stripped of agency who does not "worry [his] pretty head about" court politics (*WK* 98). Even in that state, he displays cleverness, becomes skilled at spycraft, and starts acting like a true king (*WK* 60, 111–12, 157). Evidently, Jude is unsuccessful in her attempt to tame him; moreover, unaware of Cardan's past trauma and the still-present prophecy, she does not try to heal him.

Jude's influence on Cardan's healing begins from a distance. He heals and grows the most when he is freed of Jude's direct influence, during her imprisonment in the Undersea.⁴ Jude cannot fail to notice the change: "He's become the High King, and he's done it without me" (*WK* 255). In Jude's absence, Cardan reacquires his complete agency and is allowed the space to truly adapt to the royal role, but his changing demeanor is modelled with Jude in mind: "[W]hen you were gone, I had to make a great many decisions, and so much of what I did right was imagining you beside me, Jude, giving me a bunch of ridiculous orders that I nonetheless obeyed" (*WK* 266). While expressing admiration for her and admitting that she has helped him grow, Cardan demonstrates that, in a situation

⁴ Even when he is not with Jude, Cardan is important to the story, not just in the private, romantic sphere but also in the public, political sphere of the novels. He is not a static character but visibly develops. In this, Jude and Cardan's relationship directly opposes the second romantic plotline in the novels—the one between Taryn, Jude's sister, and Locke, a member of the court. Taryn explains: "When I'm with [Locke], I feel like the hero of the story. Of *my* story. It's when he's not there that things don't feel right" and Jude ponders: "I could point out that Taryn seems to be the one making up the story, casting Locke in the role of the protagonist and herself as the romantic interest who disappears when she's not on the page" (*WK* 87). This metatextual reference to romance stories illustrates Black's criticism on writing a romantic relationship in which only one character has agency.

like his, another's direct meddling and attempts at taming and healing can only achieve so much. Although Jude initially had a good reason not to trust Cardan and to force him into obedience, such an imbalance of power is unhealthy in any relationship, even if Jude sees their power balance as careening back and forth (*WK* 302) and believes she has not completely robbed Cardan of his free will (*CP* 320). For Cardan's change to be organic, he has to heal—with her implied help but largely on his own—and not be tamed. Instead of being tamed, he grows into more power, and it is magic that is his greatest weapon in fighting for Jude and trying to rescue her (*QoN* 76). He partially becomes the dangerous man, whose taming would place his strength at the heroine's disposal (Phillips 58)—for example, he looks “ready to tear down the whole apartment complex to find [Jude]” (*QoN* 155). Still, he does not mind being saved by Jude and acknowledges that she is “forever getting [him] out of scrapes” (*KoE* 166), yet again escaping any firm alignment with traditional gender roles and complicating his “relationship to traditional masculinity in response to” Jude's “own gender performance” (Seymour 628).

In fact, Cardan is shown to be milder and less ruthless than Jude. When he is temporarily gone from court and it is up to Jude to make political moves, she laments the fact that Cardan is not there “to stay [her] hand” (*QoN* 224). She never completely abandons her aggression, while Cardan never becomes the stereotypically dominant hero, either in their relationship or with regard to ruling. However, they do change significantly over the course of the novels, as they are required to overcome the barriers and develop a relationship; they hold onto their agency, never completely taming each other, but they do help the healing process along. As has been mentioned, Jude learns to trust and love openly, while Cardan overcomes his trauma and grows into his royal role. Jude and Cardan are, then, “willing to improve each other, be improved by one another, and . . . extend that mutual improvement to a larger community” (Shaffer 66), which results in the betterment of the position of humans in society—a reform possible only if the two work together to achieve it. The so-

ciety is now inclusive to humans—this process has been started with Jude improving the position of mortals in Faerie (*WK* 59) and is symbolically represented by a new Faerie crown being created by a trio of skilled craftsmen, one of whom is a mortal man (*QoN* 293). Furthermore, the very way of ruling has been changed, as Cardan has destroyed the old crown, whose magical properties compelled loyalty in Faerie's sworn subjects; Cardan releases the faeries from being bound to the crown, inviting them instead to follow the rulers themselves according to their own free will (*QoN* 216). Moreover, from the remnants of the broken throne, he magically creates two thrones, one for himself and one for Jude (*QoN* 284), making space for equality, not just between them as healed romantic partners and co-rulers but also between faeries and humans.

4. Gender, Magic, and Nature

Besides Jude's and Cardan's plethora of skills and resourcefulness, another important component of their power and a value that works to transform the community is magic. Although Jude is given some magical abilities by the land upon becoming queen, for the majority of the narrative, this magic is contained to Cardan. His magic fully emerges when he becomes the High King. Since "Faerie rulers are tied to the land" and "are the lifeblood and the beating heart of their realm" (*WK* 8), his magical abilities are explicitly connected to nature. In this, Black subverts the stereotype that the women are those who are inherently tied to nature—namely, women have long been conceptually linked with nature and procreation, coded as passive and juxtaposed with the masculine desire to cultivate and take advantage of the environment (Ortner 73–74; Nikolaeva 132). The narrative negates this notion by having Cardan be the one connected to the elements. After his ascension, "the isles are different. Storms come in faster. Colors are a bit more vivid, smells are sharper" (*WK* 66). The greatest display of his abilities occurs when he raises a new island from the sea floor (*WK* 313–14). What is more, the water, which is "begin[ning] to churn" (*WK* 313) during Cardan's act of creation, calls

forth the symbolic images of birth (Frye 198). Accordingly, Cardan is the one allegorically imbued with the power of procreation.

On a more literal level, it is actually the faeries who rarely get children, which is why humans, who are more fertile, are often favored as sexual partners. Cardan's marriage to Jude, therefore, potentially conjoins the symbolic fertility with the literal one. No mention is ever made to any future progeny or the plans to beget them, possibly due to the characters' ages and the existence of Oak, Cardan's nephew and Jude's adopted brother, who removes the need for the hasty creation of a royal heir, so Jude is never diminished by "an imagination of future motherhood" (Driscoll and Heatwole 278). However, Jude's humanity does suggest levels of fertility higher than are usual in Faerie, mirrored already in the pregnancy of Jude's twin, Taryn (*QoN* 50).

Jude's connection with the natural world is illustrated in the rebirth of Cardan, in which she is of pivotal importance. Cardan has been cursed and turned into a giant serpent. Interestingly, snakes had long been related to women and signified female power; they were masculinized as a symbol only later, in the Biblical tradition (Creed 64; Walker 387–88). The snake reference again upsets the image of Cardan as a masculine hero. Playing the role of the executioner, Jude slays the proverbial dragon and beheads Cardan's serpent form—at the same time, she actually allows his rebirth as he emerges from the corpse unscathed in what is clearly Black's version of the myth of the cyclical rebirth of the fertility god or goddess (Frye 160).⁵ Thus, Jude becomes both the murderer and the symbolic mother, which is underlined in the violent image of the murderer's immediate aftermath, evoking the connection between blood and giving birth: "I am shaking all over, shaking so hard that I fall to my knees in the blackened grass, in the carpet of blood" (*QoN* 279). Building

⁵ Cardan himself has previously made an unconcealed reference to the myth. Commenting on his then-reluctant and temporary occupation of the throne that Jude has intended for Oak, he says: "I am the Corn King, after all, to be sacrificed so little Oak can take my place in the spring" (*WK* 98).

up on this connection, it can also be seen how Cardan, stepping out of the corpse “naked and covered in blood” (*QoN* 280), further strengthens the implication of a rebirth.⁶ This iteration of the dragon-killing theme, one of the main stages of a quest narrative, actually rids Faerie of the true monster, “the sterility of the land itself” (Frye 189), since the monstrous serpent has been poisoning the land (*QoN* 231). Therefore, this final battle confirms that the ultimate goal of quest narratives found in fantasy fiction is “the victory of fertility over the waste land” (Frye 193). Nevertheless, Frye’s view of fertility as “the union of male and female” (193) should not be applied to Black’s trilogy on the literal level, referring to procreation and its clear distinction between men and women. Any gender stereotyping in this aspect is made impossible by Jude’s gender performance, her dual role of the mother and the murderer, and Cardan’s strong link to the images traditionally ascribed to women, with both Jude and Cardan exhibiting a degree of connection with nature.

5. Conclusion

With Holly Black’s *The Folk of the Air* trilogy being so popular, it is important to open up an academic discussion of it. Popular fiction has the power to both reflect and shape social values, and, in the period when gender identity remains a topic of much interest, analyzing one such series offers a precious insight into values and expectations upheld by its readership. This chapter was specifically interested in investigating if this young adult series manages to move beyond the gender stereotypes frequently found in genre fiction. It has been determined that *The Folk of the Air* depicts characters that, rather than completely adhering to the typical characteristics of the romance heroine and hero (as defined primarily by Pamela Regis), can rightfully be called complex. The analysis has shown

⁶ This moment confirms Cardan’s status as the High King and resolves the prophecy, as he rises out of his own spilled blood. His nakedness reminds the audience of the traditional Faerie coronation, in which the heir is unclothed and “the nakedness becomes . . . some sign of power” (*CP* 235).

that the protagonists of the series, Jude and Cardan, only partially adhere to the typical characteristics of the romance heroine and hero. Jude is a strong, intelligent, and independent heroine; even when she experiences weakness, such as the vulnerability she feels in regard to her opening up to Cardan, she works through it. At the same time, her character complies with the propositions of a typical strong woman character of the fantasy genre: she is determined, resourceful, and proud. In addition, she is shown to be able to both wield the traditionally masculine weapons and employ magical abilities. Yet, even though she exhibits some of the stereotypically masculine personality aspects, she also counters these aspects by not abandoning her feminine traits and the respect for femininity in women that surround her. On the other hand, Cardan, being powerful and tormented, unites the qualities of both a dangerous and a sentimental hero but never conforms to a stereotypical view of masculinity. The greatest differences between Cardan and a traditional hero lie in the former's relatively physically weak constitution and in his affinity for wearing make-up, which is considered a feminine inclination. Rather than being tied to his physical abilities, his strength relies on magic and nature, aligning him with the stereotypes of the feminine. Nature has long been linked with women due to the correlation between natural processes and women's reproductive abilities, so when Cardan uses his nature magic to symbolically give birth to an island, his act of creation associates him with the feminine domain. In other words, *The Folke of the Air* trilogy prevents the solidification of stereotypes. By placing its heroine and hero in mortal peril and demonstrating their need for mutual help, Holly Black's series explores the topics of power imbalance in relationships and ultimately shows that equality is required in any successful relationship—in romantic ones as well as in the wider workings of society itself.

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