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Nobody's sidekick

The Female Hero in Rick Riordan's

The Heroes of Olympus

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract <p>Pro gradu -tutkielmassani pohdin naishahmojen sankaruutta Rick Riordanin nuortenkirjasarjassa <i>The Heroes of Olympus</i> (2010-2014). Keskityn analyysissäni Riordanin naishahmoista kahteen, Piper McLeaniin ja Annabeth Chaseen, ja pyrin osoittamaan, että Riordan käyttää kummankin tytön kehityskaarta positiivisena esimerkkinä naisten sankaruudesta ja voimaantumisesta. Käytän tutkimusmenetelmänäni lähilukua ja aineistonani koko viisiosaista kirjasarjaa, erityisesti Piperin ja Annabethin näkökulmasta kirjoitettuja lukuja.</p> <p>Tutkielmani teoriaosassa tutustun sankaruuteen eri näkökulmista ja tarkastelen esimerkiksi terminologiaa ja sankareiden tunnusmerkkejä. Teoriakatsauksessani esitän, että tapa kuvata sankaruutta usein maskuliinisuuden kautta vaikuttaa negatiivisesti asenteisiin naissankareita ja -hahmoja kohtaan. Käsittelen myös lyhyesti ikivanhaa järjen ja tunteiden kahtiajakoa maskuliiniseen ja feminiiniseen. Aiheenani olevaa kirjasarjaa koskevan tutkimuksen vähyyden vuoksi käytän taustateoksinani tutkimuksia sankaruudesta, naissankareista, sekä lasten- ja nuortenkirjallisuudesta yleisesti.</p> <p>Vertaan tutkielmassani Riordanin kirjasarjan naiskuvausta myös lyhyesti muihin suosittuihin nuortenkirjasarjoihin. Vaikka Riordanin naishahmot ovatkin aktiivisuudeltaan askel parempaan suuntaan, kaikkia naishahmojen perinteisiä sudenkuoppia ei silti ole pystytty välttämään. Siksi pohdin myös Riordanin naiskuvauksen heikkoja kohtia ja käsittelen sarjan hahmojen sukupuolijakaumaa, naishahmoihin liitettäviä stereotyyppisiä ominaisuuksia ja hahmojen välisiä ihmissuhteita.</p> <p>Analyysissäni keskityn kummankin tytön kehityskaareen ja pohdin käännteentekeviä hetkiä heidän matkallaan naissankareiksi. Molempien tyttöjen kohdalla Riordan haastaa perinteisiä naishahmojen rooleja ja niihin liittyviä stereotyyppioita sekä ikivanhoja kahtiajakoa kääntämällä Piperin tunteisiin liittyvät kyvyt heikkoudesta vahvuudeksi ja yhdistämällä Annabethin puolestaan järkeen ja viisauteen. Antamalla naishahmoilleen mahdollisuuden perinteisesti maskuliinisuuteen yhdistettyyn sankaruuteen Riordan tarjoaa lukijoilleen tavallista monipuolisemman joukon sankareita, joihin lukijat voivat samaistua. Tämä on pieni mutta tärkeä askel kohti tasa-arvoisempaa maailmaa niin kirjojen sivuilla kuin niiden ulkopuolellakin.</p>			
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Table of Contents

1	INTRODUCTION.....	4
1.1	POSITIVE IMAGES OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT: MY MAIN THESIS.....	5
1.2	<i>THE HEROES OF OLYMPUS</i>	7
1.3	HEROISM.....	13
1.3.1	<i>Notes on terminology</i>	13
1.3.2	<i>Heroes</i>	15
1.3.3	<i>Female heroes</i>	18
1.4	MALE AND FEMALE, REASON AND EMOTION: THE ANCIENT DICHOTOMIES	22
2	THE CRITICISM OF FEMALE PORTRAYALS IN <i>THE HEROES OF OLYMPUS</i>.....	23
3	NOBODY'S SIDEKICKS: THE FEMALE HERO AS PIPER AND ANNABETH.....	31
3.1	"MUCH MORE THAN A PRETTY FACE": PIPER.....	32
3.2	"EVEN STRENGTH MUST BOW TO WISDOM SOMETIMES": ANNABETH	41
3.3	"A CHILD OF APHRODITE LEADING A CHILD OF ATHENA": PIPER AND ANNABETH.....	46
4	CONCLUSION.....	48
5	WORKS CITED.....	53

1 Introduction

The heroic age seems always to be past, and yet, whatever time we live in, we seem always to need heroes: figures who attract and capture our imaginations, whose thoughts and actions cut new channels, whose lives matter because they occupy new territory or suggest alternatives to the cramped dailiness of ordinary existence. (Edwards 33)

The story of heroism is one that can be found in virtually any mythical tradition around the world, making it undoubtedly one of the most popular archetypes to ever exist. Heroes have long filled the pages of books and been at the root of our stories, and the need for heroism has not diminished even in the modern day. Even though heroism as an archetype is not gender-specific – meaning that both men and women can, by nature, be heroic – patriarchal culture has long since made it a male affair. Women who could have been all-powerful goddesses and autonomous heroes of their own stories, have been pushed to the background. All over the narratives, potential female heroes are reduced to either meaningless secondary characters or evil adversaries, silenced and discredited. They remain this way because we are not used to the concept of the female hero, as Western culture tends to treat heroism as a strictly male domain.

The importance of having both male and female heroes as role models accessible to readers is tremendous, especially in literature targeted to young audiences, as what children read will affect their view of both the world and of themselves. Children learn from what they read, so children's literature has an ability and the power to teach children about their possibilities, about tolerance, and finding their own strength. Children can be taught that their lives are not limited by their sex, race or gender; that whoever they are, they can make their own stories.

In my search for the lost female hero – a woman who is allowed to be both feminine and heroic in the traditional sense – I turned to modern young adult fantasy literature. As my source material I have chosen a fantastical portrayal of heroism, a mythical tale that weaves together ancient and modern, Rick Riordan's series *The Heroes of Olympus*.

1.1 Positive images of female empowerment: my main thesis

As heroism has typically been associated with men, it provides an interesting lens through which to look at female characters. In the era of the "strong female character", we have come to expect a woman in a story to lack feminine qualities, to be a masculine, physically strong "action chick". Some might even look down on female characters with traditionally female qualities, shrugging them off as a stereotypical and patriarchal construction. Little do we realize that doing so only serves to enforce the limitations on female characters and through them, on women. Calling for action chicks and warrior princesses alone to represent the best of female characters means we push femininity out of the picture and give in to the ideal that nothing feminine, no woman in possession of traditionally feminine qualities like compassion and caring can ever be considered heroic.

As feminism is a word of many connotations, quite a few of them today negative, it is useful to explain what I mean by feminism in this context. I have adopted Roberta Trites's view of feminism: the idea that feminism is a positive force for all individuals that relies on the equality of all people (Trites 2). According to Trites, a feminist children's novel (or in this case, young adult novel) is "a novel in which the main character is empowered regardless of gender ... [and] the child's sex does not provide a permanent obstacle to her development" (4).

Trites believes that

any time a character in children's literature triumphs over the social institutions that have tried to hold her down, she helps to destroy the traditions that have so long forced females to occupy the position of Other. (7)

This relies on the idea of the protagonist's agency: as the story goes on, the female protagonist becomes "more aware of her own agency, more aware of her ability to assert her own personality and to enact her own decisions" (6). Feminist characters are thus active participants in their own story, subverting traditional gender roles and able to "combine the strengths traditionally associated with femininity" (11) with typically male strengths, while still staying recognizably feminine.

What the pool of current representations of female characters needs are characters who are diverse and multifaceted and bring out the different sides of femininity in their portrayals, be they heroes or villains, protagonists or antagonists, sidekicks or just passers-by in a story. The female characters in Rick Riordan's *The Heroes of Olympus* are a step forward on the road to the self-empowered female hero, being determined, active forces in their own narratives. They don't have to dominate the story to stand out – in addition to the girl protagonists, the secondary characters also include women of extraordinary strength who could not, in Tasha Robinson's words, be "replaced with a floor lamp" (n. pag.).

In my analysis I have chosen to focus on Piper McLean and Annabeth Chase, two of three girl protagonists in *The Heroes of Olympus*. Through my analysis I intend to demonstrate that these girl characters are active participants in their own stories and also key forces in the heroic narrative of the series. They are fully rounded characters with strengths and weaknesses who grow and develop throughout the narrative, who possess many traits and cannot be characterized by simple monikers such as "strong", "smart" or terms like "action chick". They have no need

to be "a hero in drag" (L. Paul 162) or exceedingly masculine to be heroic – instead, they draw strength from their feminine qualities and even stereotypes without being limited or defined by their gender. I argue that Piper and Annabeth's respective journeys are used by the author as positive images of female empowerment and heroism. Their characteristics, chiefly Piper's connection to emotion and Annabeth's to reason, function as challenges to the age-old binary opposition of reason as masculine and superior to emotion as feminine. In addition to this, Riordan makes the traditionally masculine affair of heroism gender-neutral by having his female characters vocalize their own heroism and reclaiming their own destinies, thus providing his readers with a more diverse pool of heroes to relate to.

The organization of my thesis will be as follows: I will start by introducing Riordan's series and move on to define the term heroism and look at its many incarnations in both masculine and feminine traditions, also touching upon the binary oppositions of male/female in relation to reason/emotion. In chapter two I will go through some possible criticisms for the portrayal of the main female characters in *The Heroes of Olympus*. In the subsequent analysis, I will first look at Piper and then Annabeth, ending with a short note on their teamwork. I will end my thesis with my conclusions on the necessity of female heroes. As Riordan's work has not yet been the topic of literary research, my literature review will include general works on heroism as well as research on other young adults titles and children's literature in general.

1.2 *The Heroes of Olympus*

Published between 2010 and 2014, this five-book young adult series by Rick Riordan takes place in modern-day United States where seven demigods, children of Greek or Roman gods and humans, struggle to come to terms with their own

identities and powers in order to stop the rising forces of Gaia, Mother Nature herself, from destroying both the gods and humanity. *The Heroes of Olympus*, henceforth abbreviated as *HoO*, is a continuation of Riordan's previous Greek mythology inspired pentalogy *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (*PJO* 2005-2009), which first introduced readers to Greek gods, heroes and monsters dwelling in 21st-century United States.

Despite their strong connection, there are notable differences between the two series. Firstly, the *PJO* series was narrated from the first-person point of view of the character Percy Jackson, a son of Poseidon coming to terms with the existence of Greek mythology in real life and his own part to play in it. The *HoO* series is instead comprised of third-person points of view of a total of nine different characters, with each book having between three and seven different point of views alternating every few chapters. This means that whereas the *PJO* series had only one central protagonist through whom the story could be followed, making the other characters immediately inferior to Percy in importance, *HoO* has, by the last book in the series, nine protagonists of equal importance and character development – including, importantly, four girls.

Secondly, *HoO* builds upon the well-established Greek mythological world of *PJO* and adds Roman mythology to the mix. Much of the tension in the series rises from the rift between Greek and Roman demigods in their respective camps, the Greek Camp Half-Blood and the Roman Camp Jupiter, which have been separated and in the dark about each other for centuries after much bloodshed and rivalry. The gods, having been difficult enough personalities in just their Greek form in *PJO*, are now nearly all incapacitated and even more impossible as their personalities have split between their Greek and Roman forms. The series centers largely around

attempts to bring together the two rival camps and the broken minds of the gods, for only standing together do they have hope of defeating Gaia and her forces. This is also demonstrated in the choice of main characters, as the main group of protagonists includes demigods from both camps.

Aside from these important differences, each book in *HoO* still follows largely the same pattern started in *PJO*. The particular plot of each book centers around a quest, often following the typical pattern for a heroic quest narrative of departure, initiation and return laid out by Joseph Campbell, carried out by specific characters and alluded to in a prophecy from the Oracle. In addition to these heroic journeys in each book, there is a larger, overarching journey and quest narrative encompassing the whole series, centering around the unfolding of a Great Prophecy which depicts an event of great importance in the existence of Greco-Roman mythology. While *PJO* was built around the myth of the *titanomachy*, or the Titan War, which was a mythological war between the Greek gods and the Titans led by Kronos, *HoO* recreates the second of great mythological wars, the *gigantomachy* – the war between the gods and the second children of Gaia, the Giants.

The Heroes of Olympus draws greatly from the stories of Greek mythology and largely follows the heroic journey and quest narrative of separation, initiation and return, which will be further explored in the next sections. Both the male and female heroes start out as unsure of themselves and unaware of the extent of their powers, go on a journey characterized by the endurance of trials and tests both physical and psychological, often encounter dangers and even death, and finally, often through a sacrifice, return with the power to right wrongs (Edwards 34). This is well exemplified in the plots of each novel, with an overarching quest narrative binding all five books together.

The Lost Hero (LH 2010) kickstarts the unfurling of the Prophecy of Seven with the introduction of three new protagonists and a return of familiar faces. Percy Jackson has gone missing. While looking for him, his girlfriend Annabeth Chase, another character from the first series and a daughter of Athena, comes across three new demigods – Jason Grace, Leo Valdez and Piper McLean, sons of Jupiter and Hephaestus and a daughter of Aphrodite respectively – who she brings to Camp Half-Blood after receiving a cryptic message from the Queen of the gods herself, Hera. After learning that Hera has been kidnapped by giants, the new trio sets out on a quest to free her, to stop the king of the Giants from rising, and to restore the memory of the amnesiac Jason. They succeed in saving Hera and learn that both Jason and the missing Percy are pawns in Hera's risky plan to unite the two demigod camps – Jason, a Roman demigod from Camp Jupiter had his memory wiped out and was brought into contact with the Greeks, while Percy, also suffering from amnesia, was sent to the Romans.

The second book, *The Son of Neptune* (SoN 2011) follows Percy Jackson to the Roman Camp Jupiter, where he meets more new faces: Hazel Levesque, a daughter of Pluto; Frank Zhang, a son of Mars; Reyna Ramirez-Arellano, a daughter of Bellona and the commander, *praetor*, of the Romans; and a fan-favorite from the first series, the son of Hades, Nico Di Angelo. The camp gets a visit from the god of war Mars, who claims Frank as his son and sends him, Percy and Hazel to Alaska to find and free the chained god of Death, Thanatos so the dead would stop rising. Through many dangers and close calls the trio manages to get to Alaska, free Thanatos and destroy the giant guarding him, Alcyoneus. They also retrieve the Roman league's lost eagle standard, a symbol of the league's power, on their way and return to lead the Roman camp into victory against the giant Polybotes and his

attacking forces. Percy's memory is returned and the Greeks arrive at Camp Jupiter on their ship, the *Argo II*, to unite the two camps and the seven of the prophecy.

The Mark of Athena (MoA 2012) centers around Annabeth and her quest to succeed in what other children of Athena have failed in for generations before her: following the Mark of Athena and finding the *Athena Parthenos*, a statue of Athena stolen by the Romans and the key to healing the rift between the two camps. After the meeting between the Greeks and the Romans goes horribly wrong, the seven begin their long journey aboard *Argo II* towards the Ancient Lands of the Mediterranean. In Rome, Annabeth follows the Mark of Athena and finds the *Athena Parthenos* in a maze underground directly above Tartarus, guarded by the worst enemy of the children of Athena, the weaver Arachne. Annabeth manages to overcome Arachne with trickery and her friends find her just in time to recover the statue from the collapsing room. It all comes with a terrible cost, however, as Arachne, plunging down to Tartarus,¹ pulls Annabeth and Percy down with her.

The House of Hades (HoH 2013) is the first novel in the series to have two distinct journeys, one following Percy and Annabeth in Tartarus and one charting the adventures of the remaining demigods on the Mediterranean. Percy and Annabeth struggle through Tartarus to fulfill their last promise to the crew of *Argo II* – to make it to the Tartarus side of the Doors of Death in order to seal them shut so dead monsters could no longer be reborn in the mortal world. Meanwhile, with the help of Nico the remaining demigods on board the *Argo II* seek the mortal side of the Doors located in an old temple to Nico's father, Hades. Against all odds, Annabeth and Percy make it to the Doors with the help of a titan and a giant who sacrifice their

¹ The deepest pit of the Underworld, where all the worst monsters were shackled in Greek mythology.

lives so that Percy and Annabeth can return to the mortal world. Gaia, however, is still rising, and the two demigod camps are on the brink of civil war.

The last book, *The Blood of Olympus* (BoO 2014), brings the story and the overarching quest narrative to a close. Like its predecessor, it follows two narratives that come together in the end: in one, Nico and Reyna, who attempt to deliver the statue of *Athena Parthenos* to Camp Half-Blood to stop the war between the two camps; and in the other, the seven demigods of the prophecy on their way to stop Gaia on the Acropolis in Athens. At the last minute, Reyna and Nico get the statue to the camp, stopping the war and destruction of Camp Half-Blood. Gaia, however, manages to finally awaken fully even though the gods come to the aid of the heroes and help them defeat the Giants. As she directs her attack to Camp Half-Blood, the seven join the fight with the Greeks and Romans and finally, Jason, Piper and Leo defeat the earth goddess and save the world from destruction.

Though many different approaches could be taken with these books, I have chosen to concentrate on two of the three main female characters, Piper and Annabeth, and the ways their journeys create positive images of female empowerment. These girls are examples of female characters who are not only female stereotypes or merely boys in girls' clothes – instead, they are active characters in their own right who encompass traits traditionally associated with each gender without being defined by femininity alone. Before I analyze these two characters further, however, it is first necessary to go into the theory underlying this thesis - the meaning of heroism and traditional dichotomies. After that, I will briefly consider how Riordan's female heroes compare to other female leads in young adult fiction, and also consider some of the limitations of Riordan's portrayals.

1.3 Heroism

1.3.1 Notes on terminology

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to clarify the notions of heroism that I will be using in my analysis. In order to do this, I will turn to dictionary definitions of what a hero is, especially when compared to a protagonist. I will also address the issue of what term to use when talking about women who are heroes – the 'female hero' or the 'heroine'.

The Oxford English Dictionary gives the following definition of a hero:

A man (or occas. a woman) of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favoured by the gods; esp. one regarded as semi-divine and immortal. Also in extended use, denoting similar figures in non-classical myths or legends. In Ancient Greece, heroes to whom a partly divine nature was attributed belonged to either of two categories: deified human beings (esp. historical figures) whose great deeds had raised them to a rank intermediate between gods and humans, and who were venerated or worshipped; and demigods, said to be the offspring of a god or goddess and a human. In practice often no distinction was made between the two categories.

This is the definition of a hero I will be using throughout my paper – the traditional meaning of a hero, one that, firstly, has been around since Ancient times; secondly, has been used to talk about demigods, who are also the main subject of this paper; and thirdly, has traditionally not been used in reference to women.

Often in my research for background material I ran into a specific problem, namely the use of the word 'hero' when simply meaning 'protagonist', especially when it came to research done on female heroes or heroines. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories*, this application of 'hero' has been found in the English language since the late 17th century (253). In my paper, however, I differentiate

between a hero and a protagonist – for my purposes, a protagonist is simply "the chief character in a dramatic work" ("Protagonist" n.pag.), whereas my definition of a hero stems from the traditional, pre-17th century definition of the word. Many times, though, heroes and protagonists overlap, for heroes tend to be the ones readers "identify with in the story" (Jones 129), and there are, of course, protagonists who are also heroes in the traditional sense – Riordan's characters are a good example of this.

As for the term used to describe heroic women, there are two possibilities, a 'female hero' or a 'heroine'. Scholars have used both terms when talking about heroic women, sometimes interchangeably, and both terms are, indeed, useful and accurate. However, during my research I have noticed that the term 'heroine' is more often used when talking about a female protagonist instead of a female hero. Indeed, many studies have stated something similar to the following:

[T]here is a distinct scarcity of female characters that are heroic in the same sense we usually associate with male heroes. Therefore . . . this study defines the term 'heroine' in its most generic sense, as any female protagonist. (Gottschall et al. 86, emphasis added)

I have chosen to use the term 'female hero' in my paper for several reasons. First of all, it is the term used by many scholars and authors who refer to women as more or less traditional heroes in their studies, such as Jones and Lichtman. Secondly, I find the term 'heroine' slightly restrictive: it is merely a female version of the word 'hero', diminutive in its nature, as Jane Yolen states (xvii). Thirdly, and most importantly, the term 'heroine' is never used by Riordan himself to refer to the two girls I'm focusing my analysis on. In *The Heroes of Olympus* series, both the girls and the boys are referred to as heroes, without any emphasis by the word on their gender. Even though it would perhaps be best to just refer to the girls as

'heroes', I have nevertheless chosen to add 'female' in front of the term to avoid confusion and turn the reader's attention to what I'm suggesting – that these girls are both feminine and heroic.

What then, exactly, is a hero? Let us next consider how the concept of hero has been historically defined.

1.3.2 Heroes

In her 1989 essay "The Heroic Ideal – A Personal Odyssey", author Diane Wynne Jones lists the traditional qualities of a hero found in practically every heroic narrative since Ancient times:

[H]eroes are brave, physically strong . . . and possessed of a code of honor that requires them to come to the aid of the weak . . . and the oppressed when nobody else will. In addition, most heroes are either related to, or advised by, the gods or other supernatural characters. . . . But above all, heroes go into action when the odds are against them. They do this knowingly, often knowing they are going to get killed . . . When they die, their deaths are glorious and pathetic beyond the average. (130, emphasis added)

These qualities are important in the makings of a hero. They are strong like Hercules, noble and brave like King Arthur, and hold on to their code of honor like Sir Gawain – but also, I might add, they are to some extent vulnerable and flawed, like Achilles with his heel and pride. They are by no means perfect – it is part of the charm of the heroes that they are also human, making mistakes like each of us ordinary people without stories to our name. These mistakes can either make them or break them, for they can fall, or "with difficulty, prevail" (Jones 131).

According to Jones, a "second type of hero" also exists – the "foxy, tricky hero, the hero with a brain" (130). This is the type of a hero that tends to use brains rather than brawn to get out of a difficult situation, the most well-known example

perhaps being Odysseus. Annabeth, more often than not, fits this description, being related to the story of Odysseus in a lot of ways. I will come back to this later in my analysis of her.

The most important point Jones makes, however, is the fact that heroes knowingly "go into action when the odds are against them" (130). They know the challenges up ahead will tax their strength and test their abilities, even leave them for dead, but the goal they see ahead of them, the thing they are fighting for, is too important for them to give up. They will fight, even if they are the underdog, even if the odds for their survival are minimal. Hercules undertakes tasks that sound impossible to beat; Sir Gawain faces the Green Knight knowing he must take a hit that will likely kill him; or, in a more modern story, Riordan's demigods take a stand against the all-powerful force of Gaia, knowing the chances for their victory are slim. This is what makes heroes so compelling – they teach us a lesson or two about never giving up.

Another common trait of heroes is their difficult relationship with their parents. Often, the parents of the hero are absent from the events of the heroic narrative – either dead, lost or gone of their own accord – or if they are present, they tend to be somehow opposed to the hero (Edwards 34). This was a common theme in hero-stories of old and still recurs today – notable examples being *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars*, which both feature either absent or hostile parents. The notion of difficult parent-child relationships is central also to Riordan's *The Heroes of Olympus*, where the demigods not only have hardships related to the mortal side of their family, but also often feel abandoned by their godly parents – so much so that it leads to the main conflict in Riordan's first series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*.

Sometimes related to the problems with parental relationships is the next defining trait of a hero, namely their marginality to their society. Edwards explains that heroes often feel "a sense of specialness, of uniqueness, and also often of isolation" (34) in relation to their society. This can be due to their unique powers which are a result of supernatural intervention, an accident of birth, or their parentage. This sense of uniqueness and isolation is also true to Riordan's demigods, who are inherently different from the rest of their society through their godly parentage: they are often dyslexic due to their ability to read ancient Greek or Latin; have ADHD because of their battle and survival skills; and of course possess supernatural talents and knowledge unavailable to ordinary human beings. They can only dream of living a normal life in a world filled with monsters and danger.

One thing all heroes also tend to share is the concept of a journey. This journey can be either literal or figurative, and will take the hero through three stages: departure or separation, initiation, and return, as described by one of the most influential scholars of mythology and heroism, Joseph Campbell in his acclaimed book from 1949, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. During these stages, the hero departs from a common day world into a world of some sort of supernatural forces, comes face to face with threats, obstacles and temptations he must overcome, and finally, often through sacrifice, will return to his own world with powers to right whatever was wrong to begin with.

While Campbell's portrayal of heroism largely centers on male heroes, other theories also exist. Drawing on Erich Neumann's Jungian analysis of the mythical story of Amor and Psyche and especially Psyche's heroism, Lee Edwards argues that heroism is, in and of itself, "an asexual² or omnisexual archetype" (44). Heroism,

² In modern context, asexuality refers to a lack of sexual drive. Edwards's use of the term is different, as in her work the term is used to refer to something that is not gender-specific. I try to avoid this term

according to her, "concentrates on the possibilities of human growth and change" (44), thus being representative of humanity in general and not confined to a specific ethnicity, gender, sexuality or class – as she well states, heroes are "the emblem of humanity, whose actions . . . resonate for all of us regardless of our sex" (42). As Psyche, being a sort of female Hercules, shows us, "women, too, may be elected to bear heroic burdens, to share heroic glories" (35).

If heroism indeed is a human condition that is not governed by sex, why, then, have most of our glorious heroes been male? The reason to this, according to Edwards, lies in our Western culture and in the way it instructs us to define what is heroic:

For if we define heroism by action alone and limit those actions we call heroic to those marked by unusual physical strength, military prowess, or even social or political power, then a physiology or culture which limits women's capacities in these areas also, by definition, denies women the possibilities of heroism. (39, emphasis added)

Thus we can perceive that whereas heroism itself is not gender-specific, the fact that heroism is most often connected to masculinity is a social and cultural construction which limits our perception of women as heroes. While we all have an idea of what a male hero is like, what about female heroes? What has been said about them, and what exactly makes women heroic? Are they capable of being heroes in the traditional way we usually associate with male heroes, or is there a brand of heroism that is feminine by nature? We will now turn to look at these questions.

1.3.3 Female heroes

Though seemingly scarce, stories of female heroism go back thousands of years. According to both Lichtman (1996) and Powers (1991), stories of female

in my paper due to its many meanings, but if I do use it somewhere, it is always in the meaning used by Edwards.

divinity and heroism predate the male-centered stories most familiar to us today. In her book *The Female Hero in Women's Literature and Poetry*, Lichtman argues that in ancient societies with matriarchal cultures, women used to be the original heroes. The ever-continuing feminine hero cycle of birth, motherhood and death – indeed connected to the survival of mankind – captured the imaginations of the ancients, who saw women as divine beings capable of being reborn through their offspring, whereas men were strictly confined to the mortal world (10-11). Similarly, Powers charts the development of the female character in Greek mythology from pre-Olympian times in her book *The Heroine in Western Literature*. According to her, the original tribes of the Aegean were matriarchal and saw divinity as something feminine, and there is evidence to suggest that women were central and heroic figures in their stories. Powers gives as examples the stories of Helen of Troy and Ariadne, who both used to be powerful goddesses in their own right, autonomous heroes of their own stories.³

Such goddesses, however, are much less familiar to us today. Our Helen became, as Powers puts it, "the passive and powerless victim of her own beauty, permanently etched in literature as the unfaithful wife" (8), and Ariadne, without whom Theseus would never have found his way through the labyrinth of King Minos, was left abandoned and helpless on an island, broken-hearted and alone. These once-powerful goddesses became nothing but helpless victims and scapegoats, stripped of all their divinity and any heroism that may have marked their tales in the distant past. Both Powers and Lichtman agree that the reason for this change was the development of patriarchy. When the needs of the once-matriarchal tribes started

³ It is important to note that to this day there is not an absolute consensus on the existence of purely matriarchal tribes in the Near East during prehistoric times. Evidence from archeological excavations suggest however that at least to an extent matriarchal tribes existed, and women were revered as goddesses and heroes. (Powers 7)

changing, they created their divinities for military and ecological success. As the patriarchal hunting tribes conquered the typically matriarchal agricultural tribes, the status of women degraded, taking with it the tradition of female heroism (Powers 6-8). After this, women were silenced in stories that used to be theirs, and they became the supporting characters in the male hero's narrative as his mother, the obstacle in his path, or as his eventual prize (Lichtman 11). These are the stories we see when we study Greek mythology these days, stories where

[w]omen are props in the hero's drama, or . . . displaced souls in conflict with the restrictions of patriarchal culture who in myth learn lessons meant for all the world. Women are functionaries, backdrops in a mythology which insisted . . . on the metaphoric centrality of the hero. (Powers 4)

This is not the woman's role in mythology alone. Women have been treated as secondary characters in the canon of folktales, literature and movies as well. Fairy tales, according to Yolen, have gone through similar changes before becoming the versions we as readers are most familiar with. Cinderella and Little Red Riding Hood have both been revised and revised again to depend on woodland creatures and men respectively (xviii). Folktales featuring active female characters have been pushed to the background when anthologists have decided to foreground stories promoting the idea that women are "weak and witless or, at the very best, waiting prettily and with infinite patience to be rescued" (xvii). The same is, or at the very least used to be, true for probably the biggest authority in fairy tale retellings, Disney movies. (This, however, is starting to change with the advent of heroic, independent female characters in movies like *Brave* and *Frozen*.) From all these examples we can conclude, as Yolen says, that

[i]n book after book, film after film, we edited, revised, redacted, and destroyed the strength of our female heroes, substituting instead a kind of perfect pink-and-white passivity. (xviii)

Many scholars have been frustrated with this absence of an "acceptable, self-determined heroine" (Powers 4). As Edwards notes, women tend to be secondary and subordinate to the male hero's primary and central character, unable to exist in a story on their own (36). Women are to be meek and passive, patient and kind, or, if they represent the obstacles in the hero's way, they are often "goaded into turning evil" or hell-bent on revenge (Jones 131-32). They are the wicked witch, the evil stepmother, the ugly stepsister, the temptress, the sleeping beauty. They are the character who "carries spears but does not hurl them", who "dresses well but does not dirty her nails in the fight", who "lies down in a glass casket, until revived by an awakening kiss" (Yolen xvii). Even Britomart – from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* – whom Jones names as a "proper hero", is represented as an allegory for Chastity, a very feminine virtue (133).

Although female heroes may be hard to find, they do exist – there are indeed women in stories around the world who refuse to be silenced (cf. Powers 11). Frustrated by the lack of positive role models for her daughter she came across in literature, Kathleen Ragan set out to create an anthology of folk tales from around the globe depicting a wide array of extraordinary female heroes of all ages, social classes and personalities. She found numerous heroic women, including "courageous mothers, clever young girls, and warrior women" who "rescue their villages from monsters, rule wisely over kingdoms, and outwit judges, thieves, and tigers" (xxiii). They overcome obstacles, ride into battles and grow as characters just as male heroes do. They are not, however, just women acting the part of men – they are also in possession of qualities that are thought of as feminine by nature, qualities that even

the early matriarchal tribes worshiped in their goddesses: a mother's love, protection, and perseverance.

Ragan's female heroes are also the kind of female heroes exhibited in Riordan's novels – girls who are courageous, clever and active, without being defined by the qualities of a single gender. They are feminist characters who have freed themselves from the shackles of patriarchal norms, being neither mere stereotypes nor heroic only because they are in possession of masculine qualities. Their heroism comes from both the physical and the psychological, from self-determination and realization of their own strengths and weaknesses, from action and thought.

1.4 Male and female, reason and emotion: the ancient dichotomies

For the purposes of this thesis, a quick review of the concept of binary oppositions is in order.

From Plato's *Phaedrus* to Aristotle's *Poetics* through to the works of Enlightenment philosophers like Descartes, Hobbes and Kant, dichotomies such as male/female, reason/emotion and mind/body, to name only a few, have been the building blocks of Western "thinking and social practices" (Prokhovnik 2001, 4; see also Jaggar 1989; Terzioska 2001). The greatest threat that these dichotomies possess is their ability to construct our reality: already in ancient Greece, Aristotle saw the world reflected in his Pythagorean table of positives and negatives, of two opposing forces of which one was inherently superior to the other (Terzioska 366). Through these dichotomies, which are "expressions of hierarchical power relations expressed in social practices in patriarchal society" (Prokhovnik 1), reason has been associated with the male sex, leaving emotion and women as the cast-aside others in the world run by the rational man. According to Prokhovnik, the dichotomies don't exist separately from one another:

(T)he two dichotomies are interconnected and interdependent, in that 'reason' has helped to define 'man', 'man' has helped to define 'reason', and both definitions by their dichotomous nature have contained a subordination and exclusion of 'woman' and 'emotion'. (3)

These dichotomies and the concept of hierarchy they exhibit has been widely criticized by both feminism and gender theory, mainly for their construction of the male as the dominant and superior sex (Terzioska 366). The dichotomies themselves "have proved extremely resistant to reform" as they have been ingrained deep into our way of conceptualizing the world (Prokhovnik 3). Thus a term like "rational woman" is, according to this logic, a contradiction in terms, for rationality is associated with masculinity instead of femininity. In his books, Riordan seeks to challenge this dichotomy: he both elevates the woman/emotion concept from weakness to strength, and creates a female character strongly characterized by the rational. We will return to this later in the analysis – now, however, it is time to consider the criticism towards his female portrayals.

2 The criticism of female portrayals in *The Heroes of Olympus*

Even though *The Twilight Saga's* leading lady Bella Swan is not a stellar example of a good role model for girls – a damsel in distress, being almost entirely defined by her love triangle, only becoming somewhat heroic in the end through a completely physical transformation – she is, nevertheless, a precursor to mainstream female leads. By making Bella the leading character in her saga, Stephanie Meyer opened doors to a myriad of female leading roles in mainstream young adult literature and YA fantasy, a genre which had previously been strongly (but not entirely) led by male characters in successful series such as *Harry Potter*, *Eragon* and *Artemis Fowl*. Without Bella, would we have leading ladies like Katniss

Everdeen from *Hunger Games*, Clary Fray from *Mortal Instruments*, America Singer from *Selection*, and the other numerous female leads that have taken their place on the shelves of YA literature?

Still, like with Bella, the main hook in the storyline of many leading ladies tends to be a love triangle, in which the girls are typically made to choose between a childhood friend and a newfound love interest. One of these boys usually represents the good, safe choice whereas the other is of the darker, edgier and more interesting kind. Promising characters as Katniss, Clary and America are, their relationships end up defining them as characters more than their own accomplishments and traits do. This storyline, appealing as it is to its audience, reduces these girls to their prescribed role and chips away some of the feminism the characters could have, and have, presented.

The female representations in *Heroes of Olympus* are not without their problems either.⁴ One possible criticism towards the feminism of *Heroes of Olympus* is the persistence of a team formation very typical to young adult literature. When the characters are divided, like they are in the first and second books, the teams consist of a girl and two boys, and this is often the case when tackling quests as well. Also, typically, the girl is the love interest to one (or in some cases, both) of the boys, like Piper is to Jason in *The Lost Hero* and Hazel to Frank in *The Son of Neptune*. This is a problematic construction, for it tends to put one of the boys in the forefront as the main character and reduce the girl to the role of love interest and sidekick.

Margot Magowan, the creator of Reel Girl, a blog centered around gender equality in films, calls this trope the Minority Feisty. It is a word she uses to describe a "token strong female character or two who reviewers will call 'feisty'...supposed to

⁴ It should be noted that in this chapter, I also include the third female lead, Hazel, in the discussion.

make us feel like the movie is contemporary and feminist, unlike those sexist films of yesteryear" ("The curse" n.pag.). The Minority Feisty is an easy way for creators of children's and adults' entertainment alike to appear as feminists, to give something for girls and women in a movie targeted for boys and men. The same principle can be applied to literature as well.

It could be argued that the girls in Riordan's series are just another example of Minority Feisty. As I mentioned before, they are often included as the only girl in a group of two boys, act as love interests, and on the surface, can seem to be just another sidekick on the male hero's journey. However, upon closer inspection, they also have their own hardships, journeys, quests and stories that make them much more than the typical Minority Feisty. The amount of character development put into these girls alone is enough evidence to argue for their status as characters in their own right. Their portrayals are not without their flaws and they are not the perfect feminist characters – nevertheless, they are a step in the right direction.

A convincing case can, however, be made for the argument that the boys do nevertheless get more attention. Not only are there numerically more of them than there are girls, two of the books are also named after Percy, namely *The Lost Hero* and *The Son of Neptune*. *The Mark of Athena* is the only book of the five to contain a direct reference to a female character, and most cover art for the books also concentrates on the boys. All of the aforementioned things can be blamed on the culture that considers male experience more interesting or exciting, and that works focusing on boys will sell better. Girls will read books and watch movies targeted primarily to boys and relate to male characters, whereas boys will never watch something they consider 'girly'. A good example once again comes from Disney: after the box office results of the 2009 animated feature *Princess and the Frog* were

less-than-stellar, the title of the movie was blamed to have turned away the potential male audience ("Disney" n.pag.). In young adult literature, too, creating series centered around boys and their experiences could be considered a way to ensure sales, as there are for sure those who do judge a book by its title and cover.

In addition to titles and covers, we might also consider the number of chapters dedicated to each character, and especially the average lengths of the chapters. I started the process of looking into this by first counting how many chapters written in their point of view each character had. The results of this can be seen in table 1 below:

	Jason	Piper	Leo	Hazel	Frank	Percy	Annabeth	Nico	Reyna
<i>The Lost Hero</i>	20	18	18						
<i>The Son of Neptune</i>				17	16	20			
<i>The Mark of Athena</i>		12	13			12	15		
<i>The House of Hades</i>	8	4	8	12	8	18	20		
<i>The Blood of Olympus</i>	12	9	9					16	12
TOTAL	40	43	48	29	24	50	35	16	12

Table 1: The number of point of view chapters by character by book

As can be seen in this table, Percy and Leo have the most chapters dedicated to their points of view, with Piper a clear third and Annabeth and Hazel following Jason as fifth and sixth. The total number of chapters is to the boys' advantage, but this also has to do with the fact that there are more boys than there are girls. A more in-depth look is needed, as the amount of chapters per character does not tell the whole truth. Table 2 below shows the amount of chapters, pages and average page lengths for each characters as well as for boys and girls respectively.

	Jason	Piper	Leo	Hazel	Frank	Percy	Annabeth	Nico	Reyna	BOYS TOTAL	GIRLS TOTAL
Chapters	40	43	48	29	24	50	35	16	12	178	119
Pages	374	441	476	263	225	449	274	112	100	1636	1078
Average chapter length	9,35	10,26	9,92	9,10	9,38	8,98	7,83	7,00	8,33	9,19	9,10

Table 2: The chapters, pages and average length by character

This table shows that Piper is indeed the one with the longest average chapter length. This is proof that even though the boys dominate in sheer numbers, there is at least one girl who indeed gets more attention. All in all, the average chapter length for the boys and the girls only differ by 0,09 pages, so they are fairly evenly matched in that respect.

Riordan, at least, thinks so. After a follower asked him on Twitter whether there would ever be a lead character who is female person of color in his novel, he tweeted in his response that he considers the girls in *Heroes* lead characters and sees the series as a team story comprised of narrators of equal importance (Riordan 2014). Aside from the main trio, the books also host a sizeable crowd of other female characters representative of the multiple sides of the female experience: the leader of the Romans, Reyna; the Oracle of the Greeks, Rachel; the warlike Amazons with male slaves; the Hunters of Artemis sworn to virginity; the feminine and self-sure Calypso; the goddesses with their own, differing personalities; and above all, the menacing mastermind running the whole story, Gaia.

Riordan's choice to introduce a female antagonist could be considered anti-feminist, especially since the antagonist in question is Gaia, the divine mother of all nature and a revered figure in some branches of feminism, namely ecofeminism.⁵

However, as Riordan closely follows Greco-Roman mythology in his series, the

⁵ Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism that "examines the interconnections between the domination of women and the domination of nature" (Ruether 2000, 97)

choice was clear, for Gaia was the opposing force to the gods in the war of the giants. Greek mythology as a source material is not particularly feminist or even female-friendly, so criticism against Gaia as the main antagonist is not all without foundation.

I argue, however, that Gaia's villainy does not make the books anti-feminist – in fact, her portrayal only serves to strengthen the multidimensionality of the series' female characters. She is the earth itself, "everywhere" (*HoH* 255), slumbering with eternal patience, waiting for the time to rise again and bring destruction with her. She is a mother ready to avenge her children, a woman under nobody's rule. She can never truly be defeated, only lulled back to sleep, so her threat is eternal. Gaia is given a story, a personality, a purpose – she is not just a villain, she is the moving force of the whole narrative, always looming over the demigods and sending obstacles their way. Her existence and actions in turn give the seven a purpose. She is the villain, yes, but a complex one, and every bit as multifaceted as the two girls I'm concentrating on in my analysis.

Another possible angle for criticism is the fact that both girls have quite a few stereotypically feminine traits. Piper's main powers center around love and charmspeak, which can be connected to the stereotype of the female siren charming men with her voice and Annabeth seems like the epitome of the smart girl stereotype. I will come back to all the aforementioned traits later in the analysis section, where each girl will have a section associated with the feminine stereotype they represent. There, I intend to show that these stereotypes are in fact positive powers for the girls and make them no less a good female character. In the course of their journey, each girl must come to terms with their feminine side and learn to see the strength it provides them with, in order to become the best, most powerful versions of

themselves. It is thanks to their feminine traits that the girls become such full-rounded female characters instead of being the stock action chick characters that only exist for the sake of representation.

This, in turn, is related to another possible source for criticism, namely that the girls are merely damsels in distress who need to be rescued by the male heroes, and only serve the story as their love interests. While it is true that the girls do get in trouble and have to be rescued, this criticism fails to notice that the boys, too, are 'damsels' in distress a fair number of times – Jason, for example, spends a good while in the third and fourth books knocked out cold. Through the course of the series, all the main characters are rescued by the others in turn. This tells an important story about equality – as human beings, there are times we need the help of others, regardless of our sex. The relationships between the characters are also very equal, with both parties contributing evenly. For these girls, their relationship status does not define them as characters – it is a part of their story, a part of their personal growth.

The final piece of critique has to do with not only their femininity, but also their parentage. The godly parents of the boys are, undeniably, the big, strong, physical gods high in importance in Greco-Roman mythology: Jupiter, the king of the gods and the god of the sky; Poseidon, the god of the sea; and Mars, the Roman god of war. Leo's father Hephaestus, the god of fire and crafts, is less of a physical god, but unrivalled in his craft, as is his son. The godly parents of the girls may seem less interesting in comparison: the goddess of love, Aphrodite; Athena, the goddess of wisdom; and Pluto, the Roman god of the Underworld, cast out from Olympus.

However, it would be wrong to disregard these deities as unimportant to mythology and small in their feats. Aphrodite is, in fact, the oldest of all the

Olympian gods, "greater than the gods or the Titans", as she puts it in *The Lost Hero* (431). She is armed with "the most powerful motivator in the world", love, which "spurs mortals to greatness" and "can bring even the gods to their knees" (*LH* 430). She was one of the driving forces of the Trojan war, punished those who scorned her and protected those deserving ("Aphrodite" n.pag.). Athena, in turn, is also a goddess of war and battle strategy, bringing together feminine virtues with masculine ones. She is the patron goddess of Athens, skilled in both crafts and war, protector of cities, inventor of many a tool and even creator of the olive tree. As a goddess of war, Athena helped many heroes on their quests, including Heracles and Perseus. The Orphic hymns even describe her as a divinity who "holds a middle place between the male and female" ("Athena" n.pag.). Pluto, god of the Underworld, is the judge of the dead and the god of riches with all the wealth within the ground belonging to him. As the ruler of the realm of the dead, he was both hated and revered by humans, and an inevitable acquaintance to all mortals ("Hades" n.pag.). As can be seen from the mythology, the parentage of the girls is no less important.

As we can see, Riordan's series is by no means perfect in its representation of female characters, for it is the boys undeniably get more attention. But looking at the girls themselves, the series is a step ahead of many young adult books to date with its representation of the multitude of female experience ranging from heroes to villains to secondary characters. Next, it is time to take a closer look at two of its female heroes, to see just how Riordan is challenging gendered stereotypes and creating a new kind of female hero.

3 Nobody's sidekicks: the female hero as Piper and Annabeth

Now that we have established the ideas of heroism and femininity and the dichotomy of reason/emotion that underlie this thesis, it is time to look more closely at the characters at its core. I have chosen to concentrate on Piper and Annabeth for the purposes of this paper, although a case for diverse heroes could be made of any of the characters in the series and further research into all of them is necessary.

However, it is between Annabeth and Piper that the greatest diversity of the female hero exists – they occupy two different spheres of the human consciousness, reason and emotion respectively, and eventually come to work together as a well-oiled machine, complementing each other.

Through my analysis of Piper and Annabeth I will argue that their individual heroic journeys as well as their teamwork function as sources of positive images of female empowerment and heroism. With these two characters, Riordan attempts to challenge traditional dichotomies of reason/emotion: firstly, he turns emotion, which is often considered a weakness, into a source of strength for Piper and treats it as the most powerful, primordial force; and secondly, he associates the traditionally masculine virtue of reason with Annabeth, who is certainly the most rational of the seven demigods. By having his female characters realize and even vocalize their own heroism through their journeys of development, Riordan takes a traditionally masculine affair and makes it gender-neutral again, allowing his readers to see a more diverse pool of heroes to relate to.

I will begin my analysis with Piper and move on to Annabeth, and lastly make a few comments on their stories overlapping. It is important to note that due to the sheer amount of material, in my close reading I will be focusing mainly on book chapters written specifically in each girl's point of view. This approach works well

with my analysis, as my greatest interest lies in the ways the girls see themselves and the way their personal journey affects their growth as characters and their recognition of themselves as heroes.

3.1 "Much more than a pretty face": Piper⁶

Much of what was said in chapter one about heroes certainly applies to Piper McLean, who the reader first meets in *The Lost Hero* (2010). Not only is she a demigod daughter of the goddess of love, Aphrodite, she is also extremely brave, ready to come to the help of the weaker and sacrifice herself for those she cares for and what she believes is right. Her marginality to the society she starts out in is very clear in many ways. She is a Native American girl caught between two cultures – and bullied for it – with a celebrated movie star for a father. She is also capable of talking people into doing things her way with the use of her mother's talent, charmspeak. On the other hand she is also very much human: a troubled child desperate for her father's attention, riddled with doubts about her own importance and abilities.

On the surface, Piper's story is nothing but a feast of female stereotypes: she is connected through her godly parentage to emotion, as women have been since, aptly, the time of the Greek philosophers. In this chapter, I argue that it is the way these stereotypes are used by Riordan that makes Piper a female hero and a source of positive imagery of femininity. Whereas stereotypically emotions are considered a weakness, for Piper, they are instead her greatest source of power. As a daughter of Aphrodite, Piper can be even more powerful than anyone, including herself, would expect her to be – "much more than a pretty face" (*LH* 429). Although Piper herself often feels not quite up to par with the others, the seemingly useless powers of Aphrodite come from something much more powerful and ancient than the powers of

⁶ *The Lost Hero* 429.

her demigod friends. As a goddess "closer to the beginning of creation than any other Olympian" (*LH* 429), Aphrodite rules through emotions and defies the rational, unable to be restricted or controlled. Her power is love, "the most powerful motivator in the world", which "spurs mortals to greatness" and "can bring even the gods to their knees" (*LH* 429).

Piper's story plays out very much like the narrative that feminism has according to Trites brought to children's literature: a narrative of liberation from earlier "passive femininity" (11). Trites's classification of the heroine could very well be written with Piper in mind:

The heroine of the feminist children's novel plays a variety of roles, takes an active part in shaping her own destiny, and does not relinquish her personal power. If she does not already know how to speak for herself, she learns in the course of the novel. If she does not already know how strong she is, she learns. If she does not already know how to combine the strengths traditionally associated with femininity with the strengths that have not been, she learns. . . . And in the process of maintaining her personal strength, she often subverts traditional gender roles, playing on stereotypes and stretching their limits. (11)

Piper's personal story is a journey of both emotional and physical growth from doubt and a sense of worthlessness to learning to appreciate her own strength – a strength built from emotions and instincts instead of physical prowess more often associated with heroism. In this section, I will describe the key moments of this journey in terms of her growth from insecurity to self-empowerment and acceptance, and then move on to discuss the further effects her story has on the character of the female hero as told by Riordan.

As is customary in the stories of heroes, Piper too must go on a journey to "find her own strengths" (*LH* 429), and for her this journey involves finding her own voice, learning to trust her instincts and emotions as a source of her power and

finally, accepting her own heroism. In both *The Lost Hero* and her second appearance in *The Mark of Athena*, Piper is plagued by doubt and insecurity and struggles to discover her voice – something of extreme importance to feminist characters and the first stage on her road to realizing her own heroism. Her voice is her defining trait, and also where she gets her name, as her Native American grandfather wanted to name her Piper because he felt she would be "the most powerful voice" (*LH* 527) their family has ever known. The sheer power of voices dawns on Piper during her main confrontation in the first book as she faces the sorceress Medea. A fellow charmspeaker and a formidable, even at first seemingly unbeatable, opponent, Medea's "most potent weapon (is) her voice" (*LH* 310). Like Piper, she can talk people into doing whatever she wants them to do, and this time decides to pit Piper's companions Jason and Leo against one another in a duel to the death. Piper struggles to stand her ground against the sorceress and keep her friends safe from harm as Medea is much more confident in her charmspeak, making Piper's "confidence crumble" (*LH* 295).

Because her powers deal with and demand a much deeper understanding of the power of emotions, which she only develops later in the story, in the early stages of the series Piper's confidence is easily shaken by others as she questions herself and her abilities. This is well illustrated by this confrontation with a fellow daughter of Aphrodite, Drew, who questions Piper's part in the central quest of the first book:

Drew snapped at the crowd. 'What can Piper do?' Piper tried to respond, but her confidence started to wane. What *could* she offer? She wasn't a fighter, or a planner, or a fixer. She had no skills except getting into trouble and occasionally convincing people to do stupid things. (*LH* 131, original emphasis)

By asking 'What can Piper do?', Drew speaks Piper's mind – it is exactly what she herself has been thinking after finding out she is a demigod, and supposed to be a

hero. While her demigod friends excel at sword fighting and possess powers of a more physical kind, Piper finds herself sorely lacking. Her ability to charmspeak seems useless to her as she can't find the confidence she needs to make it effective against the powers of her enemies – although she tries to "put power into her words, . . . her voice sound(s) shaky even to her" (*LH* 295). Quite a few times she feels "helpless" (*LH* 310) and sees herself as "a scared girl with no chance of winning" (*LH* 312), not recognizing her own importance, for she is "just a stupid child of Aphrodite", not worth "deceiving and killing" (*LH* 371). Her sarcastic response to her mother illustrates her disillusion with her own abilities: "What am I supposed to do? Put on a pretty dress and sweet-talk Gaia into going back to sleep?" (*LH* 432).

These same feelings of insecurity and uselessness resurface in *The Mark of Athena*, when Piper's confidence in her charmspeak abilities is shaken in particular when she fails to reconnect the two warring demigod camps, knowing it was her duty to act as mediator, and she blames herself for the problems that arise: "Piper's power of persuasion had, for once, done absolutely no good" and she fears she just had not tried as hard as she could have due to her distrust and jealousy for the Romans (*MoA* 100). As her mind is filled with "worry and resentment" (*MoA* 331), feelings of uselessness return to plague Piper following her failure at the Roman camp, and the effectiveness of her charmspeak begins to wane and prove "not so effective" (*MoA* 302) against their enemies due to her lack of trust in herself.

It is during these instances of the first stage on the road to self-discovery that Piper first realizes using her voice alone is not enough. In *The Lost Hero* she gets a first glimpse of the might of pure, unrestrained emotion: only when she lets her guard down and lets her emotions take control of her voice is she able to free her friends of Medea's magic:

'Jason, Leo, listen to me.' Piper put all of her emotion into her voice. For years she'd been trying to control herself and not show weakness, but now she poured everything into her words – her fear, her desperation, her anger. . . . She cared too much about her friends to let them hurt each other. . . . They hesitated, and Piper could feel the spell shatter. (*LH* 313-314)

Trying to keep her emotions in check and be rational robs Piper of the chance to rise up to her full potential. This is in direct opposition to the traditional view of the rational being valued over the emotional or irrational, for in Piper's case it is the irrational that acts as the source of her strength.

For her to become truly powerful, Piper needs not only to harness the power of emotions but also to trust her own instincts, which together act as the key to successful use of her abilities. Even if she at times wonders if "her instincts (are) wrong" (*MoA* 141), unlike in the first book where she questioned the cues her instincts were giving her and got into trouble, in *The Mark of Athena* she forces herself to act on her instincts despite a lack of complete trust in them. After she realizes she has to 'use the tools she was given' (*MoA* 343) as a daughter of Aphrodite, she is once again capable of saving herself and her friends on multiple occasions. This realization also brings her Cherokee past together with her demigod present, as old Cherokee stories her father used to tell her now act as guides she instinctually follows during times of hardship.

Regardless of all this development she goes through in books one and three, Piper is yet to call herself a hero. In both books she has already heard it from others: her mother and Hera telling her she is stronger than anyone expected and her father outright calling her a hero in *The Lost Hero*; and her boyfriend Jason telling her she is a hero on two occasions in *The Mark of Athena*, first after their confrontation with Hercules and then again after Piper saves Jason, Percy and a group of nymphs by

offering everything she has as a sacrifice. Even if others think she is "a real hero" (*MoA* 498), it is of extreme importance that she embrace it herself, as that way she takes her destiny into her own hands instead of having it defined by others – that way, she becomes an active part of her own story, mixing her feminine powers with the masculine concept of heroism, becoming the feminist character Trites defined.

The turning point on Piper's journey and her vocalization of her own heroism finally comes in *The House of Hades*, during her battle against one of the enemies the demigods have angered on their way: Khione, the goddess of snow. With all her friends incapacitated, the task of saving them all falls on Piper's shoulders alone. Khione taps into Piper's uncertainty and self-doubt by questioning her abilities, calling her "nothing" (*HoH* 343):

'You are a meddler, the daughter of a useless goddess. What can you do alone? Nothing. Of all the seven demigods, you have no purpose, no power. ... What will you do to stop us, Piper? A hero? Ha! You are a joke. (*HoH* 334-335)

Khione's words resonate with Piper, who "had had the same thoughts herself" and wonders "how could she save her friends with what she had" (*HoH* 335). After all, that insecurity has shaped her for so long: "All her life, Piper had been looked down upon, told she was useless" (*HoH* 335).

This time, Piper decides to turn her story around. She remembers everything she's been through, every insult thrown at her face, every ounce of insecurity, and finally begins to realize it had all kept her from understanding her own strength and power. As these final locks on her potential crack open, she laughs in the face of Khione's insults. According to H el ene Cixous, laughter "symbolizes the triumph of a woman who can laugh at and thus subvert the existing order" (Trites 7). It enables a feminist protagonist like Piper to grow in power, to "recognize and appreciate the

power of her own voice" as she awakens from her figurative slumber (8-9). In this instance, it serves as an awakening of Piper to her full potential as a hero. It marks the turning point in Piper's story, for she finally understands that even though she might not have Annabeth's wits or Leo's problem-solving skills, much less physical prowess with weapons, "she did have power. And she intended to use it" (*HoH* 338). This involves putting together all that she has learned over the course of three books, using her voice and emotions together to bring life to a broken machine, a metal dragon built to protect them:

She willed all her confidence into her voice – all her love for the metal dragon and everything he'd done for them. The rational part of her knew this was hopeless. How could you start a machine with emotions? But Aphrodite wasn't rational. She ruled through emotions. . . . Maybe love was no match for ice...but Piper had used it to wake a metal dragon. (*HoH* 342-343).

It is at this moment Piper for the first time uses the word 'hero' to describe herself. She turns around an impossible situation and overpowers Khione through her love for her friends and their dragon guardian, using the abilities her parentage has given her. Thinking of mortals who do "superhuman feats in the name of love all the time", Piper names herself "more than just a mortal . . . a demigod. *A hero*" (*HoH* 343, emphasis added). Through this vocalization of her own heroism, she "comes to believe in herself despite the doubts of those around her" (Trites 7) and overcomes her own insecurity, becoming fully capable of accessing the entirety of her strength and a female character in control of her own destiny.

Piper's progress in books one, three and four leads to her having embraced her heroism and potential in book five, *The Blood of Olympus*. She has found her place in the unfolding prophecy and realized her power comes from something others may consider a weakness, a useless gift. She is "way past" being hurt by her enemies'

allusions to her uselessness (*BoO* 199) and perfectly in sync with her abilities, "following her heart no matter what her brain said" (*BoO* 201). This has been her journey from insecurity to confidence, from doubt to understanding, weakness to strength – a heroic journey of its own kind, at the same time very human and very archetypal. It is a journey that must be taken by all the demigods in their time, male or female, a journey typical to adolescence and more importantly, typical to human nature.

Now that we've established the pattern of Piper's growth into a female character of full potential, it is necessary to delve a little deeper into what is achieved by this. What Riordan is doing with Piper is creating positive images of femininity and ideas traditionally ascribed to it, especially those that have often been used in a derogatory way, such as emotion and compassion. Although Piper's powers are "girly", as love and emotions have been characterized by many individuals on the course of my research for this paper, they don't make her any less of a hero – in fact, they are precisely the things her heroism stems from. Like I have mentioned earlier, thus discrediting feminine powers like hers in the favor of masculine, more physical strengths is a dangerous path that only leads to further narrowing of the pool of female characters, as they become increasingly like their male counterparts to rise up to what the audience expects a hero to be like. To truly unlock the full potential of female heroes and female characters in general, a wide range of representation is needed – girls from all ages, shapes and sizes, ethnicities and sexualities, girls feminine, masculine or blurring the lines of these stereotypical binaries.

Riordan is doing his share of challenging the stereotypes about female characters not by sweeping the stereotypes under the rug but by using them as means to a positive end. In Piper, he takes the stereotype of a female who is controlled by

her emotions and thus weak and turns it around to create a female character who is strong precisely because of her emotions. Throughout the series he brings in a defense of emotions, describing them and the goddess ruling through them as the oldest and greatest power to which mortals and gods alike must yield. Although Piper's powers are questioned and called useless by enemies and herself alike, in the end she owns her own heroism and the true extent of her powers is revealed when she plays a key role in defeating Gaia in *The Blood of Olympus*. Thus a girl of emotions has risen up and taken her place in the ranks of heroes.

Piper's journey functions as a source of positive images of female empowerment, as she learns to rise above insecurity, ridicule and the limitations placed upon her by both herself and her society. By vocalizing her own heroism she takes her own story into her own hands, letting herself no longer be defined by anyone else. This brings out an important point in the possible reader-responses by Riordan's audience, largely consisting of children and teenagers of both genders. Piper's growth to understanding and appreciating her own powers is likely to mirror the potential change of mind a reader goes through when making that journey with her character: as Piper starts out valuing brute strength over her own, so might the reader, used to the idea that a female character with feminine qualities cannot be considered heroic. Through her transformation and growth as a character the readers are introduced to a female hero who can be as strong, if not even stronger, than say, boys with traditional heroic qualities. By becoming a key player in not only her own story but in the larger narrative of the series, Piper gives the readers a different hero to look up to: someone who would've traditionally been considered weak and stereotypical but who in Riordan's books is more than capable of holding her own.

3.2 "Even strength must bow to wisdom sometimes": Annabeth⁷

Unlike Piper, Annabeth's story started long before the events of *The Lost Hero*, as she was already one of the main characters in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*. Her role in the first series strongly resembled that of Hermione in *Harry Potter*: she was the only girl in a trio of friends including herself, Percy and Grover the satyr; acted as Percy's guide and personal encyclopedia to the world of mythology; saved Percy using her wits more than once, occasionally being the damsel in distress herself; and finally, became Percy's love interest and girlfriend. Much of her character development happens during her adventures in *PJO*, where she grows – again, much like Hermione – from a slightly annoying know-it-all to a brave young woman willing to step up and put her life on the line for her friends.

Though also "a warrior" with "fire in [her] eyes" (*MoA* 32) and skilled in combat, Annabeth quite clearly belongs to what Jones describes as "the second type of hero" (130): she is "the hero with a brain" (Jones 130) whose favorite tactics for getting out of tough situations are "trickery, talk, delay" (*HoH* 107). She is the daughter of Athena, goddess of wisdom, war strategy and useful crafts, meaning she excels at plans, battles and counsel alike. Throughout her journey in both the first and second series numerous parallels are drawn between Annabeth and Odysseus, "Athena's favourite" (*MoA* 403) and the most famous of this second type of hero: both must resist the song of the Sirens, trick Polyphemus the Cyclops into releasing their friends, and overcome deadly obstacles using nothing but their "quick wits" (*MoA* 403).

In *The Heroes of Olympus*, Riordan presents Annabeth as a female character who blurs the gender boundaries, occupying, as it were, "a middle place between

⁷ This is a quote from *The Lightning Thief* (2005), the first book in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, p. 229.

male and female" ("Athena" n.pag.) as her mother Athena was said to do. Between series, her role changes from Percy's sidekick to "nobody's sidekick" (*MoA* 364) – she becomes the leader of the seven's quest to the Ancient Lands, being the one her fellow demigods look to for guidance and orders. She is thus in possession of traditionally masculine skills such as leadership and rational thought, denouncing archaic binaries and gender roles.

Annabeth's development from a sidekick to a hero in her own right centers around her journey of coming into her own as "wisdom's daughter" (*MoA* 219) – a hero purely reliant on her wits instead of physical strength or magical powers. Her battle is fought against the expectations of others and to a smaller extent, her own doubts. In Annabeth's case, it is also to some extent a battle of understanding and accepting her own limits and forgiving herself for them – realizing she "couldn't do everything alone [or] wasn't *always* the best person for every job" (*MoA* 540, original emphasis). In this chapter, I will approach Annabeth's story from two different points of view: firstly, her struggle against the expectations and prejudices of others because of her femininity; and secondly, her metaphorical journey into heroism and visibility through loss of items related to her past.

Although Annabeth also has her moments of self-doubt, she is from the start much more certain of her own skills and importance than Piper is. She jokes about saving her friends from impossible situations on her own being "just an average day" (*MoA* 242) and makes sure to remind Reyna she was the one who helped Percy find his way in Tartarus:

Reyna shrugged. 'Says the demigod who fell into Tartarus and found his way back.'

'He had help,' Annabeth said.

'Oh, obviously,' Reyna said. 'Without you, I doubt Percy could find his way out of a paper bag.'

'True,' Annabeth agreed. (*HoH* 570)

Annabeth's self-confidence also partially leads to her fatal flaw, *hubris*, or pride. Because of her pride, she can often only see her own way, getting "tunnel vision" (*MoA* 540) and ignoring the needs and ideas of others. For her, one of the greatest lessons she learns through the course of *The Heroes of Olympus* is accepting her own limits and understanding that as a leader, she sometimes has to make "the strategic decision to step back" – "she had to face the fact that she couldn't protect everyone she loved [or] solve every problem" (*HoH* 530).

Even if Annabeth herself is quite confident in her abilities, throughout her journey in both the first and second series she gets her fair share of prejudice aimed at her intelligence and skills as a strategist purely due to her gender and looks – not only is she a woman, but a blond one at that. She constantly feels like she isn't taken seriously, being a female, and has to "work twice as hard to get recognition" in anything "to do with brains" (*MoA* 229). A good example of the prejudice against her comes in *The Mark of Athena* in the form of male ghosts who shun her for entering the cavern of Mithras because of her gender: "A *girl*, said a watery voice, echoing through the room. *Girls are not allowed. A female demigod . . . Inexcusable*" (409, original emphasis). The ghosts do not believe she could ever pass the ordeals of Mithras in order to continue on her quest, mumbling "unkind words about female demigods and Athena" (410), certain that no one, "especially not a girl" (416) is able to defeat them. Annabeth, however, is unfazed and uses her ability of perception and bluff to show the "stupid male ghosts" (415) the might of a female demigod with a brain.

In addition to fighting expectations placed upon her because of her gender, Annabeth's journey is largely one of embracing her role as a leader and her legacy as a daughter of Athena. Not only must she grow and learn to make the difficult decisions a leader has to face as we saw above, she also must learn to rely on her wits and talents alone. From her first appearance in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* onwards, Annabeth has relied not only on her smarts, but also a host of helpful items: a dagger she has owned since she was seven, a laptop filled with information received from the inventor Daedalus and most importantly, a cap capable of turning its wearer invisible, received as a gift from her mother. In a way, the cap of invisibility symbolizes Annabeth's role in the first series – though she has her function as Percy's guide, best friend and eventual love interest, her own story and heroism remain largely invisible due to her secondary nature to Percy.

In *The Heroes of Olympus*, Annabeth is pulled from the sidelines to the forefront as her story progresses. Although she starts out with her one task being finding the missing Percy, further into the story in *The Mark of Athena* she faces her toughest challenge yet: finding and retrieving the long-lost statue of *Athena Parthenos*, on which the success of their quest and the fate of the world ultimately depend on. She thus becomes a key player in the narrative and can no longer hide in invisibility – to save her friends and her world, she must shed the robes of a sidekick to transform into a hero in her own right.

Riordan uses the gadgets Annabeth used to depend on as ways to highlight her transformation into a hero by having her be forced to give them up one by one along her new journey. At first they merely don't help her anymore: the uselessness of combat against her enemies in the tunnels under Rome renders her dagger unnecessary; the 3D models spewed forth by Daedalus's laptop prove too

complicated; and most importantly, the cap of invisibility given to her by her mother stops working altogether as her mother becomes incapacitated due to the Greek and Roman personalities of the gods splitting. Without the help of her prized possessions, Annabeth is left wondering how she is supposed to match up to the other demigods and save the day, until she comes to a realization:

Frustration crawled through her like an army of termites. She had spent her life watching other demigods gain amazing powers. . . . What did Annabeth have? A bronze dagger that did nothing special and a cursed silver coin. She had her backpack with Daedalus's laptop . . . She had no amazing powers. Even her one true magic item, her New York Yankees cap of invisibility, had stopped working . . . *You've got your intelligence*, a voice said. Annabeth wondered if Athena was speaking to her, but that was probably just wishful thinking. Intelligence...like Athena's favourite hero, Odysseus. He'd won the Trojan War with cleverness, not strength. He had overcome all sorts of monsters and hardships with his quick wits. That's what Athena valued. *Wisdom's daughter walks alone*. That didn't mean just without other people, Annabeth realized. It meant without any special powers. (*MoA* 402-403, original emphasis)

Only when forced to abandon the comfort of her gadgets does Annabeth truly come into her own, realizing, like Piper, that the tools given to her are more than enough – her wits are her strongest weapon. She no longer needs the items tying her to her old existence as a secondary character, exemplified by her physically losing them at the end of *The Mark of Athena*. From thereon out, her mind stays clear even if she is exhausted or scared – she relies purely on it to get her out of difficult situations, getting back into the "familiar territory" of having "a crazy idea in the face of death" (*HoH* 412).

In Annabeth, Riordan creates a female hero who rises from the shadow of others to take her place as a leader. Like Piper, she challenges the expectations of

both other characters and possibly also the readers by bringing together traits associated with both femininity and masculinity – not only is she a blonde, petite young woman, she also has skills in combat, is a master strategist and becomes the de facto leader of the quest to save the world. She is a prime example of a hero who uses brains instead of brawn to overcome obstacles, highlighting the fact that heroism does not always have to center around physical strength. By having Annabeth become the leader of the seven in place of powerful male demigods like Percy or Jason, Riordan shows his readers that leadership and heroism knows no gender – Annabeth is just as capable as a male character, if not more so, to lead a dangerous quest and embrace her own heroism.

In the last two chapters, we have looked at each girl separately, concentrating on their own respective journeys to heroism. Let us now briefly turn our attention to the importance of the bond between these two characters.

3.3 "A child of Aphrodite leading a child of Athena": Piper and Annabeth⁸

According to Trites, female bonds "have always existed in children's literature, but they are often depicted as being less important than heterosexual relationships" (90). It is often the case that girls will sacrifice their female bonds for male attention, marriage and respectable family life, growing into their prescribed roles as adults. Feminist children's novels, however, attempt to turn this tradition around by focusing instead on female bonds as ways of empowerment and a safe "metaphorical community" for female characters to "explore their subjectivity and engage their agency and their voices" (91). This is precisely the case with Piper and Annabeth, who are shown in the series "gaining strength from each other" (99) and

⁸ *The Blood of Olympus*, 199

becoming the best versions of themselves partially through their shared bond. Starting out as a simple friendship in *The Lost Hero* onwards, Piper and Annabeth are like any ordinary pair of friends – they talk about everything and nothing, support each other in times of difficulty and have a habit of stealing each other's breakfast. Their respect for each other grows as their respective journeys reach their turning points, and the support of a friend helps each girl forward on the road to a realization of her own heroism.

Apart from being a celebration of female bonds, the focal point of Piper and Annabeth's relationship also serves not only to highlight the necessity of both reason and emotion, but also to demonstrate that there are times when emotion indeed triumphs over pure reason. In *The Blood Of Olympus*, Piper and Annabeth travel to the temple of Fear and Panic in Sparta to face the Titan Mimas. Annabeth, ever searching for the logical, rational explanation, is left nearly incapacitated as the temple feeds on their emotions and ramps up their fear, defying anything rational. Piper is forced to take lead, guiding her friend with her understanding of the workings of emotions:

'We should have bided our time, talked to the enemy, figured out a plan. That always works!'

'Annabeth, I *never* ignore your advice.' Piper kept her voice soothing.

'But this time I have to. We can't defeat this place with reason. You can't think your way out of your emotions.' (200, original emphasis)

Being a daughter of wisdom, Annabeth's greatest fear is not being able to "control every contingency" (204), which is why feelings scare her – they can't be planned for. Piper is pulling Annabeth out of her comfort zone, out of all things rational and logical, further advancing her development and showing that sometimes, even logic must bow to emotions. As Annabeth, however unwillingly, lets Piper lead, it further amplifies the radical emphasis Riordan puts on emotions.

Even if emotion seems to up logic, it doesn't affect the two girls' relationship negatively. Rather, after their experiences in Sparta their friendship is stronger than ever and they work together like well-oiled machine:

Ever since Sparta, they'd learned that they could tackle problems together from two different sides. Annabeth saw the logical thing, the tactical move. Piper had gut reactions that were anything but logical. Together, they either solved the problem twice as fast, or they hopelessly confused each other. (381)

Piper and Annabeth's relationship functions as a strong example of beneficial female bonds – they complete each other and help each other shine and grow, making them stronger together than they ever were apart.

4 Conclusion

What we have is the realization that these worlds – these rich, fantastic fantasy/sci-fi/everything worlds – don't just belong to you anymore. They never really only belonged to you. They belonged to *all of us*, and always have, no matter how hard you've tried to erase us from the narrative. There's no stopping this, friend, because now that we're stepping out into the light and being seen for the heroes that we can be, we're learning that we like it, and *we want more*. (Lachenal 2016, n.pag., original emphasis)

In this day and age, female heroes should be commonplace and accepted: more female protagonists, some of whom are also female heroes, grace our silver screens and bound pages than ever before. Unfortunately, the connection of heroism with masculinity alone is difficult to challenge and erase, as it is deeply ingrained in our culture and social practices. Examples of this pop up from time to time: as the trailer for the new *Star Wars* spin-off *Rogue One* premiered in April of 2016, it caused an uproar in parts of the film series' male fan base. Furious for the inclusion

of yet another female hero (only the second one in the whole series after Rey in *The Force Awakens*), they took to the internet to vent their frustration – blaming Disney for political correctness and being generally unhappy about movies having an increasing amount of female heroes. (Vyper n.pag.). Although the fans upset about Disney's choice of leading characters were most likely a minority in the huge fan base of a franchise like *Star Wars*, they do prove the existence of a pervasive idea of male heroism, and consequently, the importance of studies like the present one.

Another recent example of the hardships faced by advocates of female heroism and female protagonists in general comes appropriately from the field of children's and young adult literature. Caroline Paul, the author of *The Gutsy Girl: Escapades for Your Life of Epic Adventure*, was not allowed to give a talk to middle school children about her book, "because it would exclude boys" (Paul n.pag.). A similar thing happened to author Shannon Hale, who had boys excused from her school talks on several different occasions because her books had female protagonists and were thus labeled "for girls only" by the administration (Hale n.pag.). These are interesting examples of a much wider phenomenon of valuing the male experience as the prevalent, universal one – girls would not be excused from talks about books with male protagonists, nor would they probably want to be. It is the general expectation and consensus that girls will read books about boys without a second thought, whereas boys will never in a million years open a "girl book" voluntarily. Hale puts it well: "I heard it a hundred times with *Hunger Games*: "Boys, even though this is about a girl, you'll like it!" Even though. I never heard a single time, "Girls, even though *Harry Potter* is about a boy, you'll like it!" (n.pag.).

This all comes down to society's construction of masculinity and the lesson it teaches boys everywhere: "anything considered remotely girl-like in oneself is not

only to be avoided, it's to be reviled" (Paul n.pag.). This idea ultimately hurts not only girls but also boys in a number of ways. Firstly, "a boy steeped in contempt for the feminine" will unlikely grow up to respect women as equals. Secondly, by only reading books about the male experience boys will not learn about the female experience, but instead only see the world through the eyes of their peers. Finally, it also limits the rights of those boys who do want to read "girl books", giving them labels that do not fit, putting them in boxes that don't exemplify their understanding of masculinity. According to Paul,

When a boy is directed to books that reflect only a narrow aspect of the world – often a part he already knows – or he is shamed for any interest in what is considered a “girl book,” his understanding of girls and of himself is devastatingly incomplete. (n.pag.)

Most likely, boys who want to read books about girls are not that uncommon. An extensive study from 2014 about gender representation in video games already suggests a different trend: 78% of the boys who answered do not think the gender of the protagonist matters in their choice of a game (Wiseman n.pag.). There is no reason why the same would not be true for books as well, and the study goes to show that the apparent attitude of boys towards "girl books" is one largely conjured up by society.

This brings up the question of the possibility and indeed, responsibility, of authors to provide books with diverse heroes for their readers to relate to. It is not, however, a simple matter of writing books with female leads – as the pervasive idea still is the aforementioned expectation of boys not being interested in books about girls, the authors are forced to balance the expectations of their audience with whatever they might want their books to represent. Books about male characters peak on lists of most sold books: Paul speaks of a week when nine out of ten books on the

New York Times bestseller list for children's books "featured Caucasian boys", and none "had a sole female protagonist" (n.pag.). Although writers may wish to change prevalent social constructs, they also need to write books that will sell in order to support themselves. As long as society sees the male experience as the universal one and female experience is pushed to the background, the possibilities an author has to make extensive change are sadly limited.

Attitudes toward female protagonists and the gender binary in general are, however, slowly but surely changing. Disney is doing both girls and boys favors by introducing female heroes in the *Star Wars* franchise. The White House is organizing a conference together with the media, toy and retail industries as well as youth organizations to come up with ideas "to break down gender stereotypes in toys and media to help children to explore, learn, and dream without limits" ("FACT SHEET" n.pag.). "Using film as a catalyst for cultural transformation", a non-profit organization called The Representation Project combats harmful gender stereotypes and "inspires individuals and communities to create a world free of limiting stereotypes and social injustices" ("About" n.pag.). Though literature seems to be moving forward at a slower pace, perhaps one of these days we will go as far as get a series named after a female protagonist – one of these days, *Annabeth Chase* might grace the *New York Times* bestseller list.

Today, there is a demand for female characters like Annabeth and Piper, who challenge gender binaries and stereotypes and function as empowering examples of female heroism. Though not perfect female characters by any means, they are nevertheless female heroes in a world of men, each making a point in their respective ways: Piper for the strength of emotions, and Annabeth for female rationality and capability to lead. As an author, Riordan has taken a step forward towards truly

inclusive literature for children and young adults: his books, especially *The Heroes of Olympus* series, feature extensive character pools with characters from several different backgrounds, ethnicities and even sexualities – characters who are heroic in their own ways, who are not limited by features such as gender, but instead have equal possibilities to triumph and grow.

With a pressing "need for people – male and female, adult and child – to speak each other's languages and wear each other's clothes" (L. Paul 149), these are the ideals children's literature should promote in today's world. And what would be a better context to promote these ideals than heroic stories, which are stories of growth and change, having always reflected the human condition of their time. In our heroes we find ourselves, and the stronger and more diverse our heroes are, the stronger we become.

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