

PAIN AND PANDEMICS: INFECTED AND EXCLUDED BODIES IN YOUNG ADULT FANTASY LITERATURE

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Illnesses can highlight inequalities in young adult fantasy literature as characters undergo exclusion and self-empowerment tied to diseases, disabled bodies, and death. In recent fictions by Marissa Meyer, Marie Lu, and Margaret Owen, heroines navigate epidemics and pandemics inciting either mistrust or mutual aid. In *Cinder* (2012), the protagonist experiences bodily vulnerabilities via her cyborg prosthetics and a worldwide plague. *The Young Elites* (2014) shows survivors of a fever facing ostracism, while *The Merciful Crow* (2019) depicts immunity as a boon and a burden. These books on the interpersonal impact of sickness can resonate intimately with readers today due to COVID-19.

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1 Introduction: Sickness and Fantasy Societies

Can loss of limb, life, or loved ones tear people apart or rather tie them closer together? In young adult fantasy literature, the impact of ailments, illnesses, and injuries straining or strengthening relationships can become a fulcrum for character conflict and social struggles. Especially in recent literary works for adolescent readers, sickness can highlight and heighten interpersonal inequalities as protagonists experience either exclusion or self-empowerment tied to diseases, disabled bodies, and death. Brushes with mortality and explorations of bodily health have long formed an integral part of children's literature, from Snow White's and Sleeping Beauty's deathlike slumbers in the Brothers Grimm fairy tales to scarlet fever afflicting children in Louisa May Alcott's nineteenth-century novel *Little Women*, published from 1868 to 1869, or Margery Williams's twentieth-century picture book *The Velveteen Rabbit*, released in 1922. Moreover, illnesses within narratives push protagonists into frightening new situations when family members pass away or their community is irrevocably altered. Illustrative examples in young adult books of the last few decades include Gail Carson Levine's 1997 fairy-tale-inspired story *Ella Enchanted*, in which the heroine grapples with the loss of her mother, and Alexandra

Bracken's 2012 dystopian fiction *The Darkest Minds*, featuring a new, oppressive government arising to combat the spread of an epidemic. The key role of contagion challenging protagonists' sense of self and place in society reflects Rachel Falconer's assertion that young adult literary works often "focus on the edges of identity, the points of transition and rupture" (2010, 89). On a broader scale, pandemics in contemporary fiction can emphasize social tensions when the almost inescapable spread of infection across vast areas causes fear, friction, and infighting. To illuminate the pivotal role of epidemics and pandemics in recent literature for adolescent readers, I examine the first book of three young adult fantasy series: Marissa Meyer's 2012 publication *Cinder* of *The Lunar Chronicles* quartet; Marie Lu's 2014 release *The Young Elites* of her eponymous trilogy; and *The Merciful Crow*, opening Margaret Owen's eponymous duology in 2019. In this literary trio, the respective heroines Cinder, Adelina, and Fie discover how sickness incites emotional extremes when they encounter both mistrust and mutual aid from family members, friends, and infected individuals. I delve into the interpersonal impact of illness, immunity, and injury in these three young adult books to explore how bodily vulnerabilities underline characters' strengths in the face of suffering. In light of COVID-19 and other contemporary world crises, these works of fiction penned prior to the global outbreak of the coronavirus can resonate particularly intensely with readers today.

Various facets of the body and mortality in children's literature have crecively moved to the foreground of recent research. Examples include Kathryn James's 2009 monograph *Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature* or the collected editions *Global Perspectives on Death in Children's Literature* edited by Lesley D. Clement and Leyli Jamali in 2016 and *The Embodied Child: Readings in Children's Literature and Culture* edited by Roxanne Harde and Lydia Kokkola in 2018. As the personal impact and social destabilization of epidemics and pandemics in young adult fiction still require further investigation, I examine how fantasy books by Meyer, Lu, and Owen use widespread disease to accentuate protagonists' navigation of both communal rifts as well as the multisensory intensity of fevers and wounds. I contend that a trio of overarching concepts crystallizes as common facets of characters' interactions with bodies and diseases in these three literary works: duplicitous sight, entwined infection and immunity, as well as interdependent instability of the body and society. First of all, sight in these fantasy settings often appears not only as a means to inspect invalids' symptoms but also as a source of uncertainty when protagonists don disguises or manifest magical abilities to cast illusions. As a second aspect, while detailed descriptions of infection foreground both the sensory immediacy of somatic suffering and widespread fear among a population, key characters' immunity to rampant sickness repeatedly reaps equal disdain. Finally, instability comes to the foreground via public disputes in these fictional

worlds mirroring corporeal frailty, for wounds and prosthetics play a key role in the course of all three narratives. Nevertheless, the heroines' acts of collaboration, compassion, and courage in *Cinder*, *The Young Elites*, and *The Merciful Crow* at times compensate for the discord sparked by pestilence. I analyse how these moments of bestowing and receiving comfort through embraces and altruistic gifts link to Irish philosopher Richard Kearney's insights on the healing potential of tactility in his 2021 monograph *Touch*. Careful tactile contact hereby forms a counterweight to the danger of disease and deep-reaching divisions in fictional populations. In this literary trio, the tension between connection and exclusion reveals that sickness can threaten the body, destabilize the unity of communities, and push adolescent protagonists to reassess their positions of dependence and disenfranchisement. Overall, as pandemics in young adult fantasy literature illuminate the fragility and malleability of both bodies and societies, protagonists in such books evaluate their agency and identity in relation to illness and injuries.

2 Cyborg Cinder: Disability and Disease

The first book of Marissa Meyer's *The Lunar Chronicles*, a quartet spanning from 2012 to 2015, features a futuristic retelling of the fairy tale "Cinderella". The titular protagonist Linh Cinder experiences bodily vulnerabilities firsthand due to her extensive cyborg prosthetics following a horrific accident in her childhood. Moreover, the danger of a global pandemic known as letumosis or the blue fever hangs like a shroud over a technologically advanced Earth in the aftermath of World War IV and especially over the crowded city New Beijing, where the heroine resides. Hereby, literary scholar Angela Insenga notes that Meyer expands upon the "embodiment trope endemic in the Cinderella mythology" by shifting the focus from the heroine's soot-stained appearance to Cinder's body as a whole, encompassing flesh and prosthetics (2018, 55). Meyer's disabled protagonist weathers her neighbors' disgust and her stepmother's disdain directed at her metal appendages and cybernetic interface on a daily basis. Although both Insenga and Ferne Merrylees discuss Cinder's cyborg status as a clash between organic and artificial elements of the body, their articles only briefly address interpersonal links connecting the heroine's injuries to the plague victims' suffering. Building upon their observations, I posit that Cinder's navigation of both her personal prosthetics and the pervasive pandemic hones her attention to notice ambiguities and inequalities related to corporeality. One prominent facet is duplicitous sight, as exemplified by the dark blots appearing on the skin of the infected as an early symptom of the deadly contagion letumosis.

These epidermal indicators of the virulent infection are juxtaposed against the sight of the protagonist's metal hand and leg. This comes to light via her comment, "It's not like wires are contagious" (Meyer 2013, 5), in response to the owner of a nearby bakery tugging her son a safe distance away from the young woman's booth in a densely populated marketplace. Shortly hereafter, there is an outcry when the baker displays letumosis splotches upon her skin. This scene contrasts the heroine's technological limbs against the easily transmittable and terror-inducing sickness. Later, when the protagonist's younger stepsister Peony catches the blue fever as well, the girl's panic at the bruise-like marks leads to tears that overcome the protagonist's own sense of self-preservation as Cinder wraps Peony in a hug in hopes of comforting her. The heroine's silent speculations whether she is also infected let every side-effect of her own heartbreak, horror, and helplessness appear as a herald of the sickness. The focus shifts from epidermal marks to internal sensations and back again while Cinder cares for her stepsister: "She fell to her knees, wrapping Peony up in both arms. [...] Bile rose in her mouth. Maybe it was a sign. Maybe stomach sickness was a symptom. She looked down at her forearm, embracing Peony to her. Still no spots" (2013, 53). Despite her stepsister's pleas to stay away lest she also become infected, the heroine lets compassion rather than caution propel her forward. Cinder highlights how the threat of contagion can heighten a sensitivity to possible symptoms and can kindle kindness that eclipses fear.

In contrast to the unmistakable signs of infection appearing on the skin, Cinder has ample experience hiding perceptible indications of her disability by concealing her cybernetic hand with gloves and keeping her metal foot out of sight. Her decision foregrounds both her self-conscious relationship with her body and the constant threat of plague research hanging over her head. Cyborgs, seen as inferior citizens, are drafted for scientific experiments in hopes of developing a cure for the deadly disease running rampant across the globe. The cyborg draft for letumosis testing links disability and disease as two main sources of discrimination and instability in Meyer's futuristic society. Although a test proves that Cinder is free of contagion after her stepsister's infection, the protagonist is forced to take part in medical trials when her stepmother volunteers her for lethal letumosis testing. Cinder's limited opportunities reflect scholar Marit Hanson's argument that cyborgs merge abilities and infirmities. On the one hand, disabilities and injuries are often alleviated or even erased via cybernetic prosthetics, yet, on the other hand, social exclusion and exploitation stress injustices (2020, 101). In Meyer's book, the law submitting cyborgs to the absolute authority of a legal guardian – such as Cinder suffering under her stepmother's tyranny – paints an image of inequality permeating this fictional world and thus mirroring the heroine's defenselessness in the disease research center. When she first arrives, knocked unconscious after attempting to escape, Cinder is in the midst of

a dream reliving the horrific fire that left her an amputee as a child. However, the nightmare fuses past injuries with the present threat of illness, for certain elements are different from her usual dreams of the accident: “Instead of being all alone, she was surrounded. Other crippled victims writhed among the coals, moaning, begging for water. They were all missing limbs. [...] Cinder shrank away from them, noticing bluish splotches on their skin” (Meyer 2013, 76). Epidermal signs of infection are interspaced with severed appendages as interconnected examples of bodily harm. Once the protagonist awakens, the medical test proceeds with an injection of pathogens into her arm. The procedure is projected upon an electronic screen that also visualizes the medical alterations to her body, thereby conjoining disease, metal bones, and synthetic limbs in one image. Cinder’s thoughts and somatic reactions to the terrifying ordeal reflect this connection: “She flinched at the cold, then again as the needle poked into her sore elbow. The bruise would last for days. Then she remembered that tomorrow she would be dead. Or dying. [...] A shudder wracked her body. Her metal leg clanked hard against her restraints” (2013, 91). Shockingly, the heroine discovers that she is immune to the pestilence due to her Lunar heritage. However, her immunity links to further exclusion because Lunars are a supernaturally gifted group of settlers on the Moon heavily mistrusted by most of Earth’s population, while the despotic Lunar Queen Levana claims that Lunar fugitives fleeing her rule bring letumosis to Earth. Whereas divisions between Earth residents and Lunars have previously received scholarly attention such as in Sierra Hale’s 2021 exploration of representations of race in Meyer’s fiction, the cyborg protagonist’s disease-driven encounters with exclusion at the testing center and thereafter in a quarantine building garner comparatively little notice.

After Cinder’s immunity allows her to leave the testing center unscathed, she seeks out New Beijing’s quarantine area to find her stepsister, thereby illustrating the sensory immediacy of suffering associated with pestilence. Freed from the fear of contracting the sickness, she gains a unique view of the remote locations normally only entered by medical droids and fatally infected individuals. Multisensory details highlight the miserable conditions of these hurriedly erected buildings used to house the victims of the rapidly spreading plague. When Cinder first arrives at such a quarantine structure at the city outskirts, olfactory perception first and foremost sets the scene in a nauseating manner: “The stench of excrement and rot reached out to her as she stepped into the warehouse. [...] This quarantine had been hastily constructed in just the past weeks as the sickness crept closer to the city. Still, the flies had already caught on and filled the room with buzzing” (Meyer 2013, 146). In comparison to the futuristic technology permeating the rest of the cityscape, helplessness in the face of letumosis’s inexorable increase leaves the conditions of this facility in a meager and unsanitary state without any comfort offered to the

infected apart from the basic needs of food and water as well as a few donated blankets. Cinder's repulsed reaction foregrounds the sickening conditions: "She reeled back, cupping her palm over her nose as her stomach churned, wishing her brain interface could dull odors as easily as it could noise" (2013, 145). Her response exemplifies how negotiating corporeality stands at the center of Meyer's young adult book as cybernetic prosthetics form a contrast against the disease's inescapable immediacy. Simultaneously, Cinder's rising nausea due to the sensory assault of the unsanitary conditions showcases how the contagion can impact even an immune individual's body.

Once Cinder receives a vial containing a dose of a rare cure for letumosis, she immediately makes use of her immunity to enter the quarantine once again in hopes of saving her stepsister. However, the young woman arrives too late and can only cradle Peony in her arms during her sibling's final moments. Repeatedly foregoing personal comfort and safety in her quest to save Peony, the protagonist reveals both the extent of empathy and the pain of powerlessness when confronted with a seemingly unstoppable disease. Cinder's embrace stands in accordance with Kearney's analysis of two major patrons of medicine in ancient Greece: Hippocrates and Asclepius (2021, 66). While Kearney associates the former with "optocentric supervision" to detect, classify, and counter sickness (2021, 66), the latter divulges a different method of healing: "The Asclepian approach accepts that even when the doctor cannot completely control mortal suffering, one can choose to be with the patient's pain" (2021, 69). Cinder's visits to her dying stepsister fall within this tradition of alleviating suffering through companionship and caring contact, for she still bestows reassurance through touch even when the cure comes too late. Moreover, the heroine demonstrates altruism amid hopelessness when, following her stepsister's passing, she gifts the cure to a young boy in a neighboring cot in the quarantine building, whom she recognizes as the baker's son from the city's marketplace. Finally, in the book's penultimate scene, the protagonist mirrors Cinderella's midnight endeavor with a vital twist. Cinder heads out to the city ball to warn New Beijing's prince about the Lunar Queen Levana's dangerous machinations. Parallel to letumosis endangering physical health, Lunar abilities can influence humans' bioelectricity. For instance, Cinder once witnesses Levana first enchant and then disperse a protesting crowd with a single glance. When the heroine also falls victim to the ruthless regent's bioelectric manipulation at the ball, the moment of corporeal defenselessness while an outside agent controls the young woman's limbs is reminiscent of an infection. Levana's abilities are a malevolent force invading the body as she attempts to kill the protagonist. The combination of Cinder's cybernetic enhancements and Lunar abilities eventually free her from the murderous monarch's psychic control, thereby asserting the unity of her organic and

inorganic body parts working together. Hereafter, the young woman's prosthetics once again come blatantly to the foreground when she flees the ball. Instead of a glass slipper, the heroine's cybernetic foot falls off during her escape, leaving her helpless and demonstrating how her technological enhancements can either fortify or fail her at critical junctures. This key scene stresses somatic extremes by shifting from bodily vulnerability to vigor and from physiological unity to divisibility in rapid succession. While the body is repeatedly fragmented into individual parts throughout Meyer's young adult fantasy due to invasive pathogens and prominent prosthetics, Cinder represents a merging of biological and cybernetic aspects of corporeality into a harmonic and empathetic whole as she seeks to save several people and thereby displays compassion in the face of contagion.

3 Exclusion and Opportunity in *The Young Elites*

Shifting the focus from a futuristic to a historical, Venetian-inspired fantasy setting, *The Young Elites* is the first book of the eponymous trilogy by Marie Lu published between 2014 and 2016. Lu's young adult series tracks the trials of adolescents bearing physiological marks and developing magical gifts upon withstanding a normally fatal contagion. As superstition and the supernatural intertwine in this fictional society, *The Young Elites* explores how the aftermath of illness can spark either cruelty or kindness. The literary work's opening epigram features a doctor's report detailing the wide range and unsettling effect of the pestilence commonly called blood fever rapidly spreading across the island nation of Kenettra. Although all infected adults inevitably die, several children survive the plague at the cost of first suffering physical pain during the disease and later facing social segregation. In the first chapter, the protagonist Adelina Amouteru's narration over a decade later offers a personal account of the sickness, which not only killed her mother and infected her sister but also left Adelina changed in terms of both physical attributes and uncanny abilities. While Cinder is only briefly exposed to letumosis during plague testing and above all suffers vicariously when she is helpless to save her stepsister, Lu's character contracts the blood fever sweeping through her country at a young age and must ride out the illness on her own. Even years later, Adelina still recalls her suffering with a numbly detached yet intensely detailed precision: "When I was four years old, the blood fever reached its peak [...] You could always tell who was infected – strange, mottled patterns showed up on our skin, our hair and lashes flitted from one color to another, and pink, blood-tinged tears ran from our eyes" (Lu 2014, 4). Akin to *Cinder*, sight in *The Young Elites* predominates in disconcerting ways

as both the epidermis and hair of the infected rapidly shift through a spectrum of different colors. In addition to these multichromatic displays, the intermingling of bodily fluids emphasizes instabilities of the victims' corporeality as the fever causes deep-reaching changes in their bodies. The gory details of Adelina's ordeal ingrain the events in the young woman's memory and accentuate the agonizing trials she managed to survive: "I still remember the smell of sickness in our house, the burn of brandy on my lips. My left eye became so swollen that a doctor had to remove it. He did it with a red-hot knife and a pair of burning tongs" (2014, 4). Resemblant of the overwhelming stench in the quarantine that Cinder perceives, Adelina highlights sensory details of taste, smell, and the sensation of scalding temperatures in her almost clinical description of the highly painful procedure.

The Young Elites above all foregrounds the aftereffects of the virulent infection, thereby underscoring how disease can exert a long-lasting influence on bodies and society even when the initial risk of infection has passed. In the years after the epidemic sweeps across Kenetra, the blood fever is the source of both exclusion and empowerment for several of the survivors. The children and youths who contract but do not die from the disease are disdainfully called *malfettos* due to the physical markings they display – such as vibrant discolorations staining their irises, hair, and skin with bloodred, deep violet, or shimmering metallic hues – as well as more unusual, even miraculous transformations. Consequently, the protagonist discovers not only that her eye has been removed and her hair has turned silver, but also that she can cast illusions. Lu's narrative juxtaposes the changeability of corporeality with social fluctuations as the epidemic permanently alters the bodies of survivors and kindles distrust among the population. In retrospect, Adelina details the gradual shift in public opinion from sympathy to suspicion to aversion as more and more young survivors of the pestilence display changes in their appearance and abilities:

When the blood fever first passed through, killing a third of the population and leaving scarred, deformed children everywhere, we were pitied. *Poor things*. Then, a few parents of *malfetto* children died in freak accidents. The temples called the deaths acts of demons and condemned us. *Stay away from the abominations. They're bad fortune*. So the pity toward us quickly turned to fear. The fear, mixed with our frightening appearances, became hate. (Lu 2014, 40)

She explains how children like her soon are no longer seen as vulnerable victims but rather as dangerous liabilities to be scorned. Their disabilities reap derision comparable to Cinder's experiences. Adelina later joins a band of adolescent *malfettos* endowed with magical gifts, who are widely known as the Young Elites and whose powers demonstrate that the impact of infection upon the body in this young adult book varies between lethal and liberating potentials. The protagonist exemplifies both of these possibilities as she suffers her cruel father's yearslong abuse aimed

primarily at her altered facial features. However, she discovers her talent of conjuring illusions upon escaping her father and accidentally killing him in the attempt. The dangerous duality of Adelina's supernatural abilities caused by the fever offers freedom and fear, thereby displaying parallels to shapeshifting. As scholars Kimberley McMahan-Coleman and Roslyn Weaver argue, shapeshifting, often associated with werewolves in popular culture, frequently evokes the body's alterations due to adolescence, disease, or physical disabilities (2012, 11–13). Especially McMahan-Coleman and Weaver's emphasis on "the physicality and pain of transformation" as well as "the implications of conceptualizing disability and illness as monstrous" in recent film and literary depictions of shapeshifting (2012, 13) resonate with Adelina's encounters with agony and discrimination. After suffering through the sickness, Adelina copes with contempt on account of her appearance as well as terror in response to her newfound powers.

Whereas the epidemic initially highlights the body's fragility, the illness's repercussions imbue several of the Young Elites with invulnerability. One survivor of the plague displays a resistance to fire, while another acquires accelerated healing. In the latter case, these regenerative powers are gifted to the leader of Kenettra's Inquisition, ruthlessly targeting *malfettos*. Ironically enough in Lu's narrative, this antagonist links immunity to heightened rather than assuaged pain, for he employs his self-healing to tirelessly hunt his fellow survivors of the blood fever and to habitually flog himself as a penance for his supernatural gifts. As a further example, one Young Elite bringing her brother back from the dead illuminates divisions between living and deceased bodies while also illustrating the uncanniness of breaking the boundaries of mortality. In contrast, Adelina's magic advances beyond the supposed harmlessness of illusions, since she manages to mimic pain in others' bodies to the point of unintentionally killing a person when her powers flare out of control, thus resembling the contagion's fatal impact. Gradually, these abilities threaten to overwhelm the protagonist in the same manner as the blood fever that nearly felled her. The young woman's predicament mirrors McMahan-Coleman and Weaver's analysis, in which they state: "Many shapeshifting texts create a sense of instability around the body, where the body is unreliable, uncontrollable, and subject to pain that cannot be stopped, which has obvious connections to the experience of disease" (2012, 122–23). Throughout *The Young Elites*, bodily uncertainty is at the center of these multiple contradictions for the magically gifted *malfettos*: healing as a catalyst for further harm, death no longer a finality, and illusions with all-too real consequences. Moreover, the adolescents with discolorations of hair and skin due to the virulent infection often suffer their neighbors' prejudice and the persecutions of Inquisitors, who presume the multihued markings to be a sign of divine displeasure. The Inquisition crescively intensifies restrictions against *malfettos*, from limiting

citizens' movement to condoning mob violence to leading midnight raids in order to terrify plague survivors. For instance, the protagonist sees her newfound friend and fellow *malfetto* Gemma endure anger and insults despite her high social standing. When Gemma participates as a jockey in a public horse race, Adelina reports, "I hear '*Malfetto!*' spat out in the air, mixing with a loud roar of boos, and when I take a good look at the crowd, I notice people who have put false markings on themselves, jeering and taunting Gemma with exaggerated purple patches painted on their own faces. One of them even flings rotten fruit at her" (Lu 2014, 137). Sight here plays a key role due to the mob's replication of survivors' physical markings, recreated to mock *malfettos*. The antagonism showcases how mistreatment of plague survivors forms the book's key conflict by dividing the society.

However, the protagonist's newfound talents underscore how she can remodel and reclaim her outward appearance through illusions, returning her silver hair to its original, raven hue and replacing her missing eye. Both Adelina's physical disability and supernatural ability thus explicitly connect to duplicitous sight, with the loss of one eye finding its foil in her illusions as she manipulates others' perceptions. She begins with summoning visual apparitions and gradually advances to auditory hallucinations and even excruciatingly intense simulations of pain. This is analogous to Lunars' bioelectric manipulation in *Cinder* and particularly the final scene after the heroine's disastrous encounter with Queen Levana at the ball, when Cinder creates illusions to escape her imprisonment. This forms an inverse to Meyer's initial scene that introduces the letumosis pandemic via visible symptoms of dark blots upon the skin. Cinder masking her metal prosthetic as a flesh hand to flee at the end of the book draws the reliability of sight further into question. As a result, both Cinder and Adelina use illusions to conceal their physical disabilities. In Lu's work, suffering and survival increasingly intertwine when Adelina is even shunned by other survivors of the pestilence on account of her powers. Despite facing exclusion not only from the uninfected members of her fantasy society but also from the Young Elites, Adelina finds support in her sister Violetta, who likewise endured the blood fever yet kept her own markings and magic hidden until recently. As Adelina's supernatural abilities born from the disease isolate her from others yet enable her to save Violetta from the Inquisition, the siblings' shared somatic experiences of overcoming an abusive father, the epidemic, and the Inquisitors' torments tie the sisters closer together. In the book's concluding scene, Adelina's sister evokes Kearney's analysis of tactility's role in compassionate contact. When the protagonist succumbs to despair and begins to cut away her long, silver hair, repulsed by the visual reminder of the blood fever's effects on her, Violetta offers solace under the light of two moons: "All around us are locks of my hair, painted silver and gray by the moons. Violetta pulls me into a tight embrace. I cling desperately to her" (Lu 2014, 341). This mutual support between

siblings mirrors Kearney's observation that touch provides comfort: "[T]o stay with one's own embodied feelings [acts] as a way of staying with the other's wounds. Such mutual abiding with pain becomes a form of shared witness – bilateral healing" (2021, 69). In the aftermath of sickness, social ostracism, and separation from their fellow *malfettos*, the sisters' embrace offers an anchor point in a sea of sorrow.

4 Infection and Immunity in *The Merciful Crow*

Finally, similar to *Cinder* and *The Young Elites*, immunity is both a boon and a burden due to social inequalities and exclusion within the avian-inspired, rigid caste system of *The Merciful Crow*. In Margaret Owen's duology released from 2019 to 2020, the protagonist Fie and her fellow travelers called Crows are responsible for the burial of plague victims due to their invulnerability to a dangerous epidemic. The sickness known as the Sinner's Plague running rampant through the medieval kingdom of Sabor both transcends and reinforces social divisions in the strictly stratified realm. On the one hand, illness elides differences, for all classes from the royal family of Phoenixes to the peasant Sparrows are susceptible to the disease. On the other hand, the Crows, belonging to the lowest tier, are exempt from infection, which kindles both superstitious fears and violent ire among the other castes. The impoverished Crows restlessly wander the kingdom's roads without any right to an alternate occupation, education, or a home to call their own. Their outcast status presents their marginalization as a mirror image to the ostracism of plague victims. Whereas sick individuals in Sabor are often isolated to avert the spread of infection, Crows are regularly persecuted out of deep-seated prejudice. The heroine's caste thus reflects scholar Helen Thomas's description of disease visualized in literary works when "the ill and dying are presented as signifiers of difference, decay or solitude" and are "sometimes exiled from the world of (healthy) others" (2016, 2). Nonetheless, Fie utilizes the negotiating power of her companions' immunity when they are called to Sabor's royal court once the news spreads that two young men recently passed away in the kingdom's capital city due to the plague. Tensions between the highest and lowest castes run high because the last time Crows collected plague victims from the palace occurred nearly five hundred years ago. As the protagonist explains:

[A]nywhere, from Sabor's western merchant bays to its cruel mountains of the east, a higher caste could cut down Crows for any invented slight. [...] The Sinner's Plague spread swift once its victim died. One body could rot a town to stone before year's end. Here in the quarantine court, with two dead boys guaranteed to bring the palace down in less than a half moon [...] here was where the Crows could not be touched. (Owen 2019, 6)

For the Crows, disease thus becomes a bargaining chip to counterbalance the oppression they brave on a daily basis. The opening chapter features the royal household refusing to pay the usual fee for the burial of their prince and his personal guard allegedly struck down by the epidemic. The Crows' unprotected social status thus comes to the foreground in the capital, where Hawks serving as soldiers all too gladly intimidate the heroine's friends and family, while the Peacock nobility watches with morbid curiosity. Enraged by the mounting danger and repeated disrespect, Fie leads her crew in a wordless yet effective negotiation by threatening to leave the infected bodies behind, which would imperil the entire city. Yet even after receiving payment and departing with the corpses, their job in the capital holds disruptive surprises in store, for the Crows soon discover that the supposed plague victims are alive and well. The Phoenix prince and his Hawk guard explain that they emulated corpses to escape assassination attempts they faced in the castle. The narrative thus establishes sight as a source of duplicity early on, for Fie and her band use the easily recognizable masks and cloaks of their caste to hide the two royal half-brothers in plain sight. While pestilence incites division in all three young adult books I analyze in this article, contagion in *The Merciful Crow* also functions as a catalyst to bring the protagonist together with two youths of higher castes in order to combat injustice in their kingdom.

However, the Crows' responsibility to ease the passing of infected individuals and to collect the bodies of those felled by the Sinner's Plague also endangers the wanderers. Their duty to regulate the epidemic with the meager means they possess frequently brings them into proximity with higher castes all too willing to vent their ire against the unprotected itinerants. For instance, upon spotting a plague beacon requesting the lowest caste to come and safely bury the contagious corpses, Fie accompanies her adoptive father to a nearby town. She immediately notes the residents' aggression: "They hated the Crows for being here. And they hated themselves for calling them" (Owen 2019, 63). Helplessness in the face of the pestilence morphs into hatred aimed at the Crows serving as undertakers. Yet the threat of the sickness spreading keeps the villagers from acting on their anger, at least momentarily. The heroine knows from experience that any attempts to forego the Crows once the plague strikes have dire consequences for all inhabitants:

But if the corpses didn't burn by their second sunset, the plague would spread [...] Fie knew too well what happened after that. By week's end, no one in the village would be left untouched. Two weeks in, the dead would be piled up, the crops blackening in the fields. By moon's end, only rotten timber, ruined earth, and bitter ghosts would remain. (Owen 2019, 63)

Unlike the public acceptance of quarantine to keep the letumosis pandemic from spreading in *Cinder* or the decade between the blood fever's past rampage across

the land and the protagonist's adventures in *The Young Elites*, *The Merciful Crow* highlights present, prevalent discordance about combatting the spreading sickness. Fie recurrently witnesses abuse and altercations when tensions between upper castes and the Crows' necessary duty reach a boiling point. Moreover, the telling name of the Sinner's Plague reflects the widespread belief in Sabor that miscreants who die of the fever are reborn as Crows to atone for their sins. This shows how sickness can reinforce exploitation enabled by social stratification, especially when villagers vent their fury against the ramblers as a substitution for their anger at the pestilence. For example, during the night after Fie visits the nearby town, a few locals ride after the Crows and set fire to their supplies once the heroine's crew manages to hide from the riders' murderous intent. To underscore the disastrous costs of such cycles of violence, the protagonist shares an anecdote about a different village that once killed a Crow's family and reaped the consequences when the survivors warned all other wandering Crows away from the area: "The band carried word out, and next time the village lit a plague beacon, no one answered until after the whole valley rotted" (2019, 194). One township's crime paid at the expense of an entire valley inundated by the epidemic showcases how the virulent infection counterbalances physical violence.

Another example is when a township kindles a plague beacon to lure Fie and her friends into a trap. Amidst this threat of danger, Fie comes face-to-face with the horrors of the contagion when she arrives to aid a villager in the final stages of the sickness: "The marks of the Sinner's Plague burned clear enough on him: lips dark with bloody tracks, skin bruised with the Sinner's Brand, eyes pasted shut with crusts" (Owen 2019, 196). The sight of the infected individual highlights the frailty of the body in the throes of illness. Fie's unsettling encounter with the plague thus resembles both Cinder's visit to the letumosis quarantine building and Adelina's traumatic memory of surviving the blood fever. Nonetheless, Fie releases the man from his suffering, earning her title as a Merciful Crow. Her soft words of reassurance and the mercy of a swift death are comparable to Kearney's argument that touch can provide solace while caring for fatally sick individuals. He notes that tactful self-awareness and attention to another's pain can allow a healer, when "confront[ing] the limits of one's capacities in the face of suffering", to still confer reprieve via the comfort of company (2021, 69). In contrast to such offers of consolation, the Crows' experience of living cut off from all other castes parallels how threats of bodily harm and corporeal divisibility stalk the protagonist, her family, and her friends. For instance, the grisly, heartrending image of severed fingers upon a lonely road – the last glimpse Fie ever received of her mother after a nighttime pursuit by murderous riders – haunts the heroine's memory for years afterwards and painfully reinforces the horror and violence the Crows undergo on a regular basis.

Nevertheless, the fragmentation of the body serves not only as a source of sorrow but also as a fount of fortitude for the young woman.

In *The Merciful Crow*, all castes are born with supernatural gifts, from the Vultures' tracking prowess to the Hawks' healing skills to the Phoenixes' control over fire. The Crows are remarkable on account of their lack of gifts, yet they can draw upon latent magic residing in teeth, often given in payment for burial duties. Similar to Meyer's and Lu's protagonists, the heroine in Owen's narrative employs magic to avoid visual detection during her quest with the Hawk warrior and Phoenix prince in hopes of altering the unjust status quo in her fictional society. Fie unlocks supernatural potentials slumbering within the body, demonstrating how enchantments and illness can become closely intertwined in young adult fantasy. When Fie describes the struggle of harnessing the power within old milk teeth as a sensation of humming through her bones expanding into severer symptoms, the somatic details of uncomfortable heat, flagging attention, and fatigue portray magic akin to a fever infiltrating the body. Thus, "Fie's sight dimmed with each step, her skull pounding" until all she perceives is "burning lungs and belly acid on her tongue" (Owen 2019, 251). Resemblant of Adelina's gifts born from suffering through the blood fever, Fie's excruciating experience that allows her to conjure invisibility and even summon fire shares some common elements with shapeshifting, since corporeal agony leads to disconcerting and awe-inspiring abilities (McMahon-Coleman and Weaver 2012, 120). Finally, the heroine engages with bodily vulnerabilities not only via teeth or the Crows' immunity but also when a final fight displays her actions as a counterpart to the contagion. In the narrative's penultimate scene, the protagonist compares her combat against the vicious and violent antagonist Greggur Tatterhelm hunting her friends and holding her family hostage to the plague's uncompromising force: "Fie struck like the Covenant's own judgement, blade crashing down on Tatterhelm's forearm" (Owen 2019, 342). Yet after this devastating blow, she chooses to withhold the mercy of a swift death. As the antagonist's lack of infection frees her from any duty toward him, Fie silently argues that their physical altercation is a decisive verdict just like the illness: "Greggur Tatterhelm suffered no plague. He'd chosen his own road, just as Fie had chosen hers. The Covenant could have sent the plague to deal with him. Instead it had sent a Crow" (2019, 350). In contrast to Cinder's prosthesis and Adelina's missing eye, Owen's book depicts the heroine and the epidemic as parallel potencies, with Fie's act of amputation against the antagonist in the midst of battle as recompense for her mother's death and all other mistreated or murdered Crows.

5 Conclusion: Sickness, Strength, and Suffering

In sum, my selection of young adult fantasy literature exemplifies how death, disease, and disability can accentuate moments of extreme emotion for protagonists. In these works of fiction, plagues often evoke uncertainty and loss of control, which eventually push both infected and immune heroines to assume agency amid interpersonal injustices and social upheavals. Cinder, Adelina, and Fie showcase a spectrum of reactions in the face of contagion, ranging from compassion to courage. Within the framework of epidemics and pandemics, these young women endure vulnerability and violence, undergo harrowing encounters and hopeful outlooks, as well as demonstrate sacrifices and sturdiness. Moreover, Meyer's, Lu's, and Owen's narratives employ links between fevers and wounds in order to highlight how characters' personal experiences of bereavement and fear intersect with local and global tensions of oppression and superstition. *Cinder*, *The Young Elites*, and *The Merciful Crow* therefore underline how the rapid spread of virulent infections sparks moments of both social division and cohesion. Disease leads the heroines, on the one hand, to brave abuse and abhorrence due to marks of illness. On the other hand, the youths also caringly reach out to both family members and strangers in the midst of sickness. Furthermore, the fantasy settings of this literary trio imbue immunity with a mystical aura and with the threat of exclusion. Surviving the danger of disease often does not re-integrate protagonists into a community but rather reinforces social fault lines and sets characters on adventurous trajectories to confront resulting inequalities. All three book series thus explore how sickness not only stresses bodily frailty but also accentuates rifts in fictional societies by kindling anger, anxiety, and, at times, altruism. Whereas disease can drive divisions between individuals, protagonists in young adult fantasy both hone their strengths in response to such suffering and discover that they can best withstand illness and overcome injuries when working together.

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