

YA Book Review

GIRL ON A QUEST: MEDIIEVAL SCOTTISH LASS DECONSTRUCTS GENDER ROLES IN *THE MAD WOLF'S DAUGHTER*

John Franklin

Pittsburg State University

Motherless—though not without family—twelve-year-old Drest has been trained alongside her warband brothers by their warrior father, the Mad Wolf.

Attacked and captured in a nighttime raid, the male members of the clan are bound to be hanged at Faintree Castle to the South.

Uneasily allied with Emerick, a sixteen-year-old grievously wounded knight from among the raiders, Drest sets off on a quest to save her brothers and their “da.” A handy map helps readers plot their course.

Soon the mismatched travelers are joined by a boy Drest rescues from bullies. Trig by name, he announces to his foster family—the village millers—that he is meant to serve the sword-wielding lass on a quest and joins the rescuer and her injured companion. As they travel through the Scottish countryside, the three trekkers personify different classes in medieval society; and, they encounter and illuminate other economic and social classes.

Teachers who use Foster’s *How to Read Like a Professor, for Kids*, will be delighted at how easily the novel provides answers for the five parts of a quest:

1. A quester: Drest;
2. A place to go: Faintree Castle;
3. A stated reason to go: to rescue her brothers and da;
4. Challenges and trials: these are plot points that are easily found within each day; and,
5. A real reason to go: to disobey her da and create unity among former enemies.

Those who desire to engage in gender studies can take advantage of the Author’s Note on Women, for Magras emphasizes Drest’s inclusion within warrior society. This warrior’s child handles a sword to good effect, providing an epiphany for a pair of village girls:

“Are you a girl?” one of them said.

“Aye, just like you.”

“You’re allowed to have a sword?”

“Aye, my brothers trained me to use it.” (p. 186)

And, for those nerds (ahem, cough! cough!) who love to play with language, there is an opportunity to create middle-school-level “kennings” (a metaphor that stands for a name). On page 209, Grimbol, the Mad Wolf, calls the roll of his sons: “Wulfric the Strong, Thorkill the Ready, Gobin the Sly, Nutkin the Swift, Uwen the Wild, and Drest . . .” The ellipsis following Drest’s name creates the opportunity for students to supply an appropriate epithet for the medieval Scottish warrior lass. In keeping with her character, I suggest Drest the Maiden Warrior.

I can easily imagine students removing this character-identifying strategy from literature to community, applying figurative language to themselves and to their classmates. You might even consider teaching a bit of *Beowulf*, calling the students “scops” (storytellers) and recreating Heorot, the mead hall where first Grendel—then later his mother—runs amock.

Literary and linguistic merit aside, what I like best about this novel is its concreteness. Drest has a deadline and a destination: unless she can rescue them, her father and her brothers will be hanged in six days at Faintree Castle. The author divides the novel into days with fast-paced, informatively titled chapters leading the reader within each day.

If a parent raises a challenge, then an alternate choice is Gerald Morris’s excellent series of historical fiction, chronicling medieval society with titular roles such as crones, damsels, knights, pages, princesses, and squires while retelling tales of literary characters such as Parsifal. Any of his books would serve well as a replacement for Magras’s 2018 novel.

Author Biography

John Franklin (BA Rice, MA Miami of Ohio, PhD Florida; certified to teach English and economics) began his career at Jones High School in Houston. During that time, he combined his love for literature with a love of travel, spending 12-week summers biking or backpacking to visit the settings of the drama, fiction and poetry he loved to teach: Scotland for *Macbeth*; London for Dickens; Canterbury for Chaucer; and the Lake District for Wordsworth. One Fourth of July he ventured further abroad, discovering himself atop the Acropolis in Athens, thinking, “Here I am at the birthplace of democracy on the birthday of the greatest democracy that has ever existed.” He has spent his life since then appreciating and sharing his good fortune. John Franklin (pronoun he) is a Professor of English and Director of English Education at Pittsburg State University in Southeast Kansas where he teaches Literature for Middle and Secondary Schools. He can be reached at jfranklin@pittstate.edu.