

# WOMEN IN ROLE PLAYING

by Roger Moore

Fantasy reflects reality in some measure. Even in the 20th century, we are more likely to see males than females in active and adventurous occupations. Even in relatively quiet pastimes like role-playing gaming, it becomes apparent that males outnumber females by a large margin. Women, as one can easily see from reading the mail DRAGON® Magazine gets, often (but not always) encounter problems when gaming with male players in AD&D® games. Getting past some of these problems and getting things settled into a more enjoyable atmosphere is the concern of this article.

One cannot set down a set of rules of conduct in playing D&D® or AD&D games (or any other role-playing game for that matter) that are guaranteed to make one a winner or make everything completely enjoyable. However, a few themes keep cropping up that are more likely to lead to good gaming than bad.

First, female players can work to maximize the advantages of their characters and minimize or eliminate the disadvantages. In many RPGs, female characters are not going to be as strong as male characters, and may have other disadvantages or limitations set upon them. It is generally true, though, that such limitations can be overcome by magical devices or weapons. Look at most of the male characters in AD&D games who own items like *gauntlets of ogre power* or *girdles of giant strength*. Do they all have strengths greater than 18/50, the female human limit? Probably not; however, the magical items completely offset their own limitations. *Potions of giant strength*, though temporary in effect, also extend these limits.

As far as gaming goes, perhaps the only other limitations women might encounter concern height and weight. This may only come into play when the female character in question finds, as one ardent giant-killing cleric in a campaign of mine did, that *hammers of thunderbolts* cannot be used well except by characters over 6' tall. The cleric mentioned above refused

to part with the *hammer*; however, and was eventually able to find a *wish ring* which she used to increase her physical height to just a bit over the 6' mark. Giants have become very scarce in my campaign now.

These character limitations, then, can be overcome in time. In truth they often do not mean much. Few fighters run around with exceptional strengths, and there will be little difference between male and female warriors in any aspect of combat. However, the non-combat aspects of the game can be even more important and more of a problem for female characters and their female players.

Male players are often more than willing to go out of their way to have their characters assist the female characters of female players. All questions about the desirability of this mild form of chivalry aside, female players seem to find that this is not such a bad deal unless they come to grow too dependent upon such aid. This can lead to problems when male players come to resent having to help what's-her-name out of a jam again, or go off with Sorceress Such-and-such on another of her quests. Both sides, male and female, should remember that interdependence among characters is what makes them stronger than the monsters they face; but taken to an extreme, dependence is destructive. All characters should be able to handle most of the minor problems they face on their own without having to call another character over to deal with rude tavern patrons or sneaky shop clerks.

A second problem growing out of the above situation is that male characters who are called upon to help female characters (as well as those male characters who just decide on their own to help female characters) may want some sort of reward out of the deal. How this is handled is left up to the players, but if a certain degree of independence is desired, then it might be wise to make it clear in one way or another that such rewards, if given at all, will be kept to a minimum. What do male characters who help other male characters out of a jam get for

rewards? Why should female characters be treated differently?

Female players may also find it helpful to develop some assertiveness when gaming with male players. Suggestions that women make in planning an adventure are often discarded by the males for one reason or another. There are two things that can overcome resistance of this kind. The first is for the female gamer to become as familiar with the rules and situations involved in the game as possible. This helps to eliminate the male attitude that female gamers "don't know anything." If the guys are setting up their characters to charge into a vampire's lair, planning to simply hack the vampire to death, but the one female player in the group points out that vampires cannot be killed that way and suggests another way of dealing with it, then that female player may pick up some brownie points with the others. Knowing the rules goes a long way toward being accepted and, more importantly, being listened to in gaming situations.

Knowing the rules may not be enough, though. Male gamers often relegate female gamers (and their characters) to secondary positions in the game.

"Here," says Chuck, "Mary's character should stay in the corridor and watch for monsters. All of us guys will go charge into the dragon's lair and beat the crud out of the dragon. If anything comes down the corridor, Mary's paladin will come in and warn us and we'll go beat the crud out of that, too."

"Why should I wait in the corridor?" says Mary. "My character is tough enough to smack a dragon on the nose. I'm tired of having to play watchdog and not get involved in any fighting."

"Well, okay," says Chuck (rolling his eyes and shrugging at the other guys in the group). "Sure. You can be our second rank, and you can attack the dragon if one of us gets killed or something, or maybe you can attack it from behind. . . ."

"Look, guys," says Mary. "We're supposed to be a team. I feel like my character's being left out of the main action, and I really want my paladin to

get involved in this. Watching the doorway isn't enough. Why don't all of our characters just go in and beat the crud out of the dragon together?"

Hopefully at this point the guys will see the light and try to make amends. No one likes to be patronized, and no one likes to be left out of the action. This means being denied the chance to become a hero (or heroine), which is no fun at all. However, if after all this the guys *still* don't want to let female characters get any of the glory, then the group may have to be dropped as hopeless. A sad possibility but a real one.

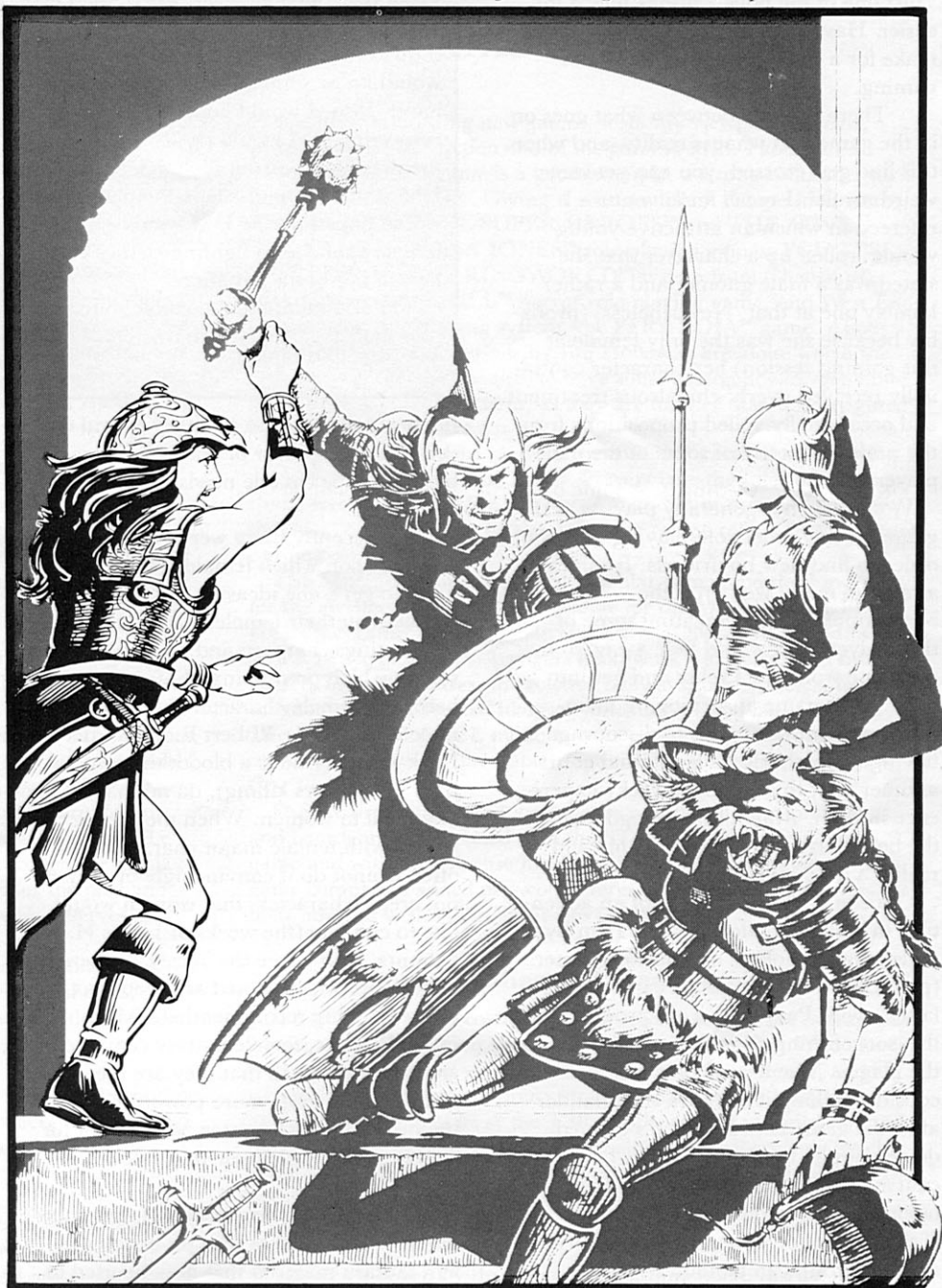
Something else female gamers might want to consider is stereotyping. One of the deadliest things for a character to have happen to him or her is to become pigeonholed, easily characterized so that everyone expects only a certain thing from that character and nothing else. In my experience, the most damaging pigeonhole that female characters can get sorted into is that of "cute magic-user" and its equally infamous cousin, "cute thief" (both of the above also come in human and elfen variations). Magic-users and thieves are certainly important in the game, but these two classes are not expected to do much face-to-face combat and are often not taken seriously by those playing fighter characters. Taking the role of an "out-of-combat" character may further cause a female player to be dropped into a second-class status in the game, unless the character is carefully handled. Being played as "cute" will often be perceived as being empty-headed as well.

Players should at all costs avoid having their characters be so easily stereotyped. What about a female thief who leads the rest of the party, scouting dangerous territory, who also wears an assortment of throwing daggers and unusual combat or adventuring devices? What about a female elfen magic-user (who in some people's eyes already has three strikes against her) who is a well-traveled, cynical, chaotic, and who enjoys timing her spells to create the maximum possible effect on those around her, building a reputation as a very unpredictable but much respected and feared mage? The role-playing of the character will, in the last analysis, make all the difference.

Mages and thieves aside, what about other professions? Why aren't there more female ranger characters? Female paladins? Female monks? Female assassins? None of these roles are what you might call "traditionally" female (if anything in an AD&D game can be called traditional), and the very presence of a female

character in such roles might gather considerable respect for that character. While we're on the topic, why not try a female gnome, halfling, or dwarf (with or without a beard)? There have been some female halfling thieves in campaigns I ran and gamed in who would cause your toes

have in role-playing is of little value unless it has something for the male readers to consider as well. Oftentimes it seems that guys like to go out of their way to try and have their characters overwhelm the female characters with their great strength, charm, sophistication,



to curl upon meeting them. Female half-elves, for those who don't mind the loss in charisma and like the gain in other areas, might also prove fun to run as characters. Humans and elves need not be the only races played in the AD&D game; male characters (and players) may sometimes find them to be more attractive, but again, being cute isn't everything.

An article that addresses the question of how to enhance the enjoyment women

brilliance at springing traps and outsmarting monsters, and so forth. This is fun, and is nothing to complain about (stuff like this can make for interesting adventures), but once in a while you get the idea that some guys think the gaming session is just another substitute for a singles' bar.

Women often like playing male characters in role-playing games, though men don't often play female ones. This some-



times takes a little while to get used to, but everything works out fine. Indeed, from a male point of view, this may eliminate some of the problems that could arise from trying to role-play male characters who are running around with a female character among them. If everyone's "just one of the boys," things flow a lot easier. Having a character that fits in can make for a more enjoyable session of gaming.

There is a line between what goes on in the game and what is reality, and when this line gets crossed, you can get some weird results. I recall an adventure I refereed in which an attractive young woman rolled up a character that she stated was a male gnome, and a rather homely one at that. Nevertheless, (probably because she was the only female at this gaming session) her character continually received overly-chivalrous treatment and occasionally veiled propositions from the *male* characters of some of the male players.

Women do not generally play AD&D games or any other role-playing games in order to find new boyfriends. It might be a relief to many women if the "singles' bar" atmosphere permeating some of their adventures would fade away, so that everyone would just relax and get into playing the game and enjoying themselves. Again, this is not to discourage having one's character go off and court another one; this can be a wacky experience in itself. Male players might keep the boundaries between the game and reality a little more in mind, though.

Once in a while you hear of an adventure in which a male character (run by a male gamer) molests a female character (played by a female gamer) against the latter's will. People who are prone to pull this sort of thing should be avoided like the plague. The female player might consider talking it out with the offender after the game is over (if she's calmed down enough by then), but the best course of action might be to have the offending player dumped from the group. If this cannot be done, then maybe another group can be found.

The best defense against this before it even happens would be to be choosy about one's gaming partners. One can also bring the topic up discreetly or use some other method to sound out the maturity level of the other players. As a last resort, it often works to simply say, "Look, if you do what you're about to do, I'm going to be mad. This is a game, but you're going to far." Direct confrontation may stop the problem; if not, then

Dear Roger,

In the previous article, you mention female characters who are molested by male characters in the course of a game. What does such behavior say of the DM who allows this to happen? I assume that if this situation were to develop, the DM would know something about it beforehand. If so, I would hope that any self-respecting DM would try to discourage the male player from such a deed. If the DM is unable to dissuade the player, I would hope that the DM would give the female character a fighting chance to get herself out of the situation.

You also mentioned possible sources for role-models for female characters. I often

emulate the heroines in some of Georgette Heyer's books when role-playing female characters. Georgette Heyer has a wonderful way of portraying all her characters so that the reader can really get a feel for why her characters act as they do; even if the novels are romantic in nature, the characters are portrayed in such a way that role-playing gamers could put these characters in other settings and still retain their basic traits of bravery, trustworthiness, decisiveness, intelligence, and even lightheartedness.

The key is action. Active and involved characters develop personalities much more easily than those who just remain in the background and do nothing.

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the best solutions are to either get rid of the offending player or leave to find a better group. No one needs problems of that sort.

Until recently there were very few sources upon which female players could draw to get some ideas on different ways to role-play their female character in fantasy settings. Fantasy and science-fiction stories which predominantly feature male heroes or female characters written by male writers, like Robert E. Howard's Dark Agnes (who is a bloodthirsty sociopath who savors killing), do not have a lot of appeal to women. When men write stories with female major characters, they often cannot do it convincingly or they do not create characters that women would like to emulate (the works of James H. Schmitz, who wrote the Telzey Amberdon novels, are widely noted as exceptions and are highly recommended). More often than not, female fantasy characters are notable only in that they are the girlfriends of some more powerful and important male character. Were it not for Conan, who would remember Belit or Valeria?

Fortunately, there are still a large number of female writers who produce excellent fantasy material that may be used to find role-models for playing female characters in fantasy games. Lynn Abbey's Rikind, C.J. Cherryh's Morgaine, C.L. Moore's Jirel of Joiry, and Jo Clayton's Aleytys stand out among the best presented and developed adventuresses in fantasy literature. Doris Piserchia, Tanith Lee, Phyllis Ann Karr, Margaret St. Clair, and Jessica Amanda Salmonson have also produced some outstanding fiction in this line, and Ms. Salmonson

has also edited two excellent collections of short stories about fantasy heroines (*Amazons!* and *Amazons II*, both in paperback by DAW Books) that any gamer, female or not, should find worth reading.

Role-playing gamers are also urged to read the DRAGONLANCE™ novels by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman, to be released starting this fall. These books have a number of female characters who are realistic and fascinating, and surely rank as some of the most memorable personalities that fantasy literature can offer. The first book, *The Dragons of Autumn Twilight*, will be released in November of this year. TSR, Inc., has already released three modules (as of August 1984) in the DRAGONLANCE series, which feature female characters who play a major role in the development of the campaign. DL3 *The Dragons of Hope*, is worth studying in particular.

It is a rather sad note that in *The Rogues Gallery* (a TSR AD&D® game aid describing pregenerated non-player characters) only one of the 18 personalities taken from actual AD&D game campaigns is a female character previously played by a female player: Jean Well's unpredictable Ceatitle Trodar Northman. "Cea" is a well-presented character with a unique personality; she is worth taking the time to examine as an alternative to playing a cute magic-user.

Comments from readers on this article would be greatly appreciated. AD&D games, like all the other role-playing games available now, are meant to be fun for all players; and, getting messed over because you and your character happens to be female is not going to be much fun at all.

