

# Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Popular Fantasy

Beyond boy wizards and kick-ass chicks



Edited by  
Jude Roberts and Esther MacCallum-Stewart

The Cultural Politics of Media and Popular Culture

# Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Popular Fantasy

This book explores the ways in which contemporary writers, artists, directors, producers and fans use the opportunities offered by popular fantasy to exceed or challenge norms of gender and sexuality, focusing on a range of media, including television episodes and series, films, video games and multi-player online role-play games, novels and short stories, comics, manga and graphic novels, and board games.

Engaging directly with an enormously successful popular genre which is often overlooked by literary and cultural criticism, contributors pay close attention to the ways in which the producers of fantasy texts, whether visual, game, cinematic, graphic or literary texts, are able to play with gender and sexuality, to challenge and disrupt received notions and to allow and encourage their audiences to imagine ways of being outside of the constitutive constraints of socialized gender and sexual identity.

With rich case studies from the US, Australia, UK, Japan and Europe, all concentrating not on the critique of fantasy texts which duplicate or reinforce existing prejudices about gender and sexuality, but on examining the exploration of or attempt to make possible non-normative gendered and sexual identities, this volume will appeal to scholars across the social sciences and humanities, with interests in popular culture, fantasy, media studies and gender and sexualities.

**Jude Roberts** is a researcher in gender and sexualities in contemporary popular cultures and a Teaching Fellow in English at Keele University, UK. She has published research on gender and sexual minorities, science fiction and fantasy, censorship, obscenity and critical theory and is currently completing a monograph titled *Contemporary Pornographic Comics and the Politics of Sexual Representation*.

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**For our fellow adventurers**

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# Introduction

*Jude Roberts and Esther MacCallum-Stewart*

This collection considers the ways in which contemporary writers, artists, directors, producers and fans use the opportunities offered by popular fantasy to exceed or challenge gender and sexuality norms. It aims to develop existing writing in the field, as well as to provide a series of new perspectives and voices, with an emphasis on more recent fantasy texts that may not have been previously examined in this context. It also recognizes developments in the study of the fantasy genre across and between different cultural forms. We take as our starting point an intent to focus on the position of the marginal within the popular. By this we mean that the essays in this collection engage directly and explicitly with gender and sexuality within the mainstream of this enormously successful genre. Our interests here concern how the producers of fantasy texts – visual, game, cinematic, graphic and literary texts – are able to play with gender and sexuality, to challenge and disrupt received notions and allow and encourage their audiences to imagine ways of being outside of the constitutive constraints of socialized gender and sexual identity. This collection is not significantly concerned with the critique of fantasy texts which duplicate or reinforce existing prejudices about gender and sexuality – there is already a growing body of scholarship concerned with exactly this approach,<sup>1</sup> and quite rightly so. Rather our interest is to discuss and focus on those texts, media and cultural products which explore or attempt to make possible non-normative gendered and sexual identities. The essays included in this collection, therefore, all explore non-normative representations of gender and sexualities or the attempt to produce them. Each focuses on a specific form of cultural product or media, including, but not limited to: TV episodes and series, films, video games, novels and short stories, comics, manga and graphic novels, and board games.

In many ways, each of the terms that make up the title of this collection – gender, sexuality, contemporary, popular and fantasy – is contested. Following the interventions of third wave feminism and queer theory, gender and sexuality/ies have come unstuck from their traditional series of binaries and must now be understood as, at the very least, subject to change over time and at most, fundamentally ‘troubled’ (Butler, 1990). There are also many, often conflicting, approaches to exploring and considering gender and sexuality/ies and this is clearly reflected in the diverse essays included in this collection.



The multitude of perspectives, views and voices within contemporary discourses of gender and sexuality is a reflection of the long-needed opening up of the space of discussion to voices and perspectives that have previously been excluded. Words have power, and naming, in particular, has often come with an agenda to oppress or marginalize. In recognition of this, we have not compelled our contributors to adopt any one particular term or set of terms in their essays. Instead we have given them the space to use the terms they consider most suitable for the texts with which they engage. In doing so we hope that the collection echoes some of the extraordinary diversity of the field.

The moment of the contemporary is, of course, a moving target. Any claim or attempt to engage with the contemporary must necessarily suffer both from the instability of the term and from the certainty that it will swiftly become dated. In deference to this, rather than giving a definitive date for our use of the contemporary we have given our contributors the space to identify their texts within or as relevant to the contemporary as they define it. Generally speaking, texts under discussion here have been produced, released or published within the last 20 years; however, some of our contributors quite rightly seek to situate the texts they discuss within broader histories of representation and genre.

There are as many starting points for a discussion of fantasy as there are fantasies – doubtless more, in fact, as each fantasy can be viewed from multiple perspectives. As noted by James and Mendlesohn, fantasy ‘is not so much a mansion as a row of terraced houses ... [with] shared walls, and a certain level of consensus around the basic bricks, but the internal décor can differ wildly’ (2012, 1). In many ways the diversity of the genre is precisely its strength, but this has often led to a rather narrow focus in the scholarship. Previous studies of fantasy fiction, in particular, have often tended to distinguish between popular fantasy and the literary fantastic, opting to focus on the latter at the expense of the former. While film, television and game studies have engaged with popular fantasy, this has also often been primarily on the basis of its reinforcement of gender and sexuality norms, rather than considering the possibilities afforded by the genre. Genre fantasy has been subject to a range of criticisms centred around both its popularity and its perceived escapism, from scholars of realism and from scholars of other non-realist genres, such as horror and science fiction. In contrast to many claims made about popular fantasy being necessarily conservative/reactionary (see, for example, Freedman 2000, Stockwell 2000, Suvin 1977), this collection explores the ways in which this genre can be and is being used to reflect on the contingency of gender and sexuality norms.

The majority of essays here focus on immersive secondary world fantasy. By making a fantasy immersive, the audience is given the illusion of the suspense of the social rules of the society in which they live. An immersive secondary world is one in which literally *anything* could happen. In creating a fantasy world anything is possible; therefore writers, artists, directors, creators and producers of fantasy worlds must acknowledge a degree of responsibility for their world beyond that of other creators. For this reason, it is appropriate

for the various authors in this collection to interrogate the ways in which these worlds are created. Beyond individual texts the metadiscourse of the genre may also be understood as encouraging a recognition of contingency. In this argument this collection is clearly indebted to Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981). Jackson's fundamental premise – that fantasy as a genre offers unique possibilities for the subversion of social and cultural norms – is rather more strongly stated than we would own, but it is a critical starting point for challenging the much-repeated claims of fantasy as 'mere escapism'. While we would be very cautious about making any definitive claim about the potential of fantasy to offer a space for critical reflection on social norms of gender and sexuality, the texts explored in this collection demonstrate that it is possible to produce popular fantasy texts which do achieve this.

The contributions in this book cover a broad spectrum of representations, as should be expected from a title of this nature. This provides in itself both an interesting overview of the concerns and interests of our writers, as well as a useful portrait of the developing face of fantasy literature. The chapters in this book cross many different tracks, therefore moving between gender, sex and sexuality, to other positions surrounding these issues. As Stephen Kenneally argues, although attempts to track pathways through this fiction do exist, they have been necessarily circumscribed by the political and social circumstances surrounding them at time of creation. Kenneally demonstrates it is now no longer possible (or, perhaps, even desirable) to track every single moment of queer fantasy within the vast plethora of these appearances within fiction. Earlier attempts by authors such as Eric Garber and Lyn Paleo (1983, 1990) were more concerned with documenting as many LGBT texts as possible, in order to give these voices more prominence; however, now it is perhaps more important to consider the ways in which these voices appear, and what tone they bring to an overall picture of queerness in fantasy literature.

Lenise Prater begins a series of literary evaluations by examining the different depictions of queerness in Robin Hobb's fantasy. The next two chapters develop a core tenet of many of the writers in this collection: pointing to steady changes regarding the depiction of social relationships within fantasy literature. Together, the roles of queer characters and activities within Hobb's world, as well as the cheerfully shifting social, familial and sexual groups of Gail Carriger's fiction discussed in Katharine Harris's chapter, point to a steady reinscription of the traditional. But first, over the span of her *Realm of the Elderlings* books, Prater argues that, although Hobb's vision can move through moments of queerness, with acts such as bonding or telepathy via magic or magical ability, it is also conservative in that it presents a predominantly heteronormative gendering of character identities. Hobb's work is, however, subject to gradual change over time, and her representation of a variety of different stances towards non-binary sexual relationships, attractions or responses to this by central characters makes these changes apparent. This is a useful way to examine an author who has been changing in accordance with exterior societal changes and writing for nearly three decades.

Following this, Katharine Harris' examination of Gail Carriger's fiction takes as its subject the non-normative familial relationships within the Parasol Protectorate books. Carriger's writing highlights a collective sharing of relationships and rearing throughout each novel, in which various characters adopt different maternal/paternal and child-rearing roles, as well as sharing roles of support and nurture. Within this, sexual and gender roles are also disrupted through the various iterations of wolf, vampire and 'soulless' characters, all of whom respond to the children within the text in unexpected ways, but are encoded as normative within the worldsphere of the novels.

Andrew M. Butler and Anna Madill also deal with similar themes – gay representation and fantasy/phantasy within Young Adult (YA) fiction and manga. For Butler, gay YA fiction is hard to find and fleeting – a troublesome subject that needs to be sought out and unpacked with care. Manga, however, is very different, and subtextual readings of gayness are a perennial and familiar topic. Madill, however, is more interested in posthuman elements within the YA fantasy text, and in using a Kleinian reading to interpret the various moments in which these occur. This is an interesting technique, especially when it considers some of the more difficult aspects of YA fiction that Butler also touches upon. Neither of these authors see these texts as merely 'coming of age' stories; more that they are deeply embedded within the twin cultures of manga and science fiction, and need to be unpacked via more complex readings.

The posthuman is a pressing theme for many of the authors in this collection, with two further chapters dealing with very different aspects of this. Lisa Bennett examines the sexualization of 'things' to discuss what she calls 'posthuman (d) evolution', speculating on the nature and future of the human and human body. In the four stories she examines, people either fall in love with or become objects, and her analysis tracks the implications of this for both the subjects in each story and the wider-reaching connotations that such fiction implies.

Alan Moore's authorship of *Swamp Thing* (1983–7) formed a groundbreaking run on a comic series that had hitherto lived in the shadow of the censorial Comics Code Authority. The character of Swamp Thing/Alex Olsen allowed Moore to question issues that now seem commonplace in comics: the transition from human–hero–proto-monster, and the debates that surround this; humanity, love, environmentalism and sex. *Swamp Thing* was a commercial success for DC Comics, and paved the way for many subsequent writings within comic book history. The work is also typical of Moore's own work, which typically explores self-representation and sexuality through a number of means, including his later work *Lost Girls* (Moore and Gebbie 2009), which re-encodes the sexual awakening of Lewis Carroll's Alice, L. Frank Baum's Dorothy and J.M. Barrie's Wendy.

Two chapters deal with the growing area of gendered representation in Game Studies. This is a topic that preoccupies both scholars and gamers themselves and, as a result, the subject of the first chapter, the video games produced by BioWare, has become a perennial topic in Game Studies scholarship. Here, the various franchises are examined in terms of the ways that

they represent LGBT characters, and the responses to these by fans and game players. As one of the games companies at the forefront of creating more diverse characters, BioWare has been subject both to censure and commendation. Steven Holmes examines this in the light of counterpublic responses to the games, as well as the changes initiated over time by BioWare themselves.

Adam Brown and Deb Waterhouse-Watson present a study of gendered appearances in board games. As part of the growing field of game studies, board games are becoming a site of tension, as they often continue in popularity for many years after they are first released, and therefore can be accused of carrying outmoded and disenfranchising depictions with them. For example, the most recent reprint of *Settlers of Catan* (Teuber 1995) has redesigned the characters on the box art to represent a more inclusive group of people. Here, Brown and Waterhouse-Watson examine two recent board games that allow the player to choose different characters, and discuss the changes in representations of gender therein. The results demonstrate that, whilst board games suffer adversely from gendered stereotyping, there are attempts to at least address this proactively.

Katherine Farrimond's examination of virginity within fantasy texts, most notably long-haul television series *Supernatural* and *True Blood*, questions the tropological representation and understanding of virginity. Her discussion of how the broken hymen functions as a symbol of virginity lost is counteracted by the more prosaic reality, where this rarely occurs during first sexual contact. The loss of virginity is predominantly feminized because of this linkage, and there is also an uncomfortable association in the assumption that penetrative vaginal sex should be considered as a character's first sexual experience. Farrimond examines masculine and feminine depictions of virginity within this assumptive framework, and examines the implications of discourse within each whereby characters such as Jessica Hanby from *True Blood* and Dean from *Supernatural* become 'rehymenated' (season 5, episode 4, 2008).

Concluding this collection is Keridwen N. Luis's examination of Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch* (1997). In identifying some of the issues in recasting fairy tales with a modern spin, Luis argues that many reimaginings simply substitute 'princess' for 'strong female character', without really appreciating how this continues to support societal norms in terms of gender and sexuality. Donoghue takes a slightly different approach however, providing a 'fairy tale of gender' itself, and moving away from settings or locations that might enforce normative readings. This approach, Luis argues, allows for a more fulsome reading of gender through such well-known stories.

All of these texts bring into sharp focus the need for fantasy to explore gender and sexuality as an ongoing process. Many encode changing readings, or examine those that have already passed but were considered extraordinary at the time. The commercial success of *Swamp Thing*, for example, allowed DC Comics to forgo the Comics Code Authority mark on an edition where Moore explored Alex Olsen and Abigail Holland's sexual relationship, ultimately leading DC to abandon the CCA label altogether for the comic. Similarly, the

responses of players to changes in BioWare's characters, and Kenneally's discussion of when to identify moments of queerness in science fiction and fantasy (SF/F) texts, have also demonstrated that presenting multiple perspectives of gender and sexuality may initially be regarded as contentious, but are becoming a more mainstream aspect of SF/F culture. Diversifying these approaches is useful, presenting the complexities of representation through multiple lenses, and thus demonstrating how far fantasy literature is capable of reaching in different directions. As the chapters included in this collection indicate, the capacity for fantasy as a genre to suggest that other worlds are possible clearly exists and, in the texts discussed here at least, we can see worlds in which the representation of gender and sexualities goes beyond boy wizards and 'kick-ass' chicks.

## Note

- 1 See, for example: Betz's *The Lesbian Fantastic* (2011), Helford's *Fantasy Girls* (2000), Inness's *Tough Girls* (1998), Lehtonen's *Girls Transforming* (2013), Reid's *Women in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2009) and Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge* (2015), as well as classic feminist analyses of gender and science fiction and fantasy; Barr's *Alien to Femininity* (1987), Palumbo's *Erotic Universe* (1986), Russ's *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1983), Wolmark's *Aliens and Others* (1993). While many of these works explicitly name science fiction and not fantasy in their titles, in reality they tend to discuss both in equal measure. There is also a substantial history of critique within science fiction and fantasy fan communities. The most prominent recent examples of this are the Strange Horizons' SF Count (2011–ongoing), which compiles demographic data of the authors of texts (both fiction and non-fiction) reviewed in a range of US- and UK-based science fiction and fantasy publications, available on the *Strange Horizons* website, [www.strangehorizons.com/2015/20150330/sfcount-a.shtml](http://www.strangehorizons.com/2015/20150330/sfcount-a.shtml), and Kameron Hurley's 2013 Hugo award-winning essay "We have always fought": challenging the 'women, cattle and slaves' narrative', published as a guest blog on the online fantasy magazine *A Drabble of Ink* at <http://aidanmoher.com/blog/featured-article/2013/05/we-have-always-fought-challenging-the-women-cattle-and-slaves-narrative-by-kameron-hurley/>

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# 1 Hiding in plain sight

## The invisibility of queer fantasy

*Stephen Kenneally*

The presence of LGBT characters in fantasy fiction, especially as main characters, is a relatively recent phenomenon, and has only lately drawn academic attention: Battis (2007) and Balay (2012) are among the few academic voices. Work on this topic has arguably been impeded because such texts are often very difficult to identify: 'Tracing the sudden visibility of lesbian and gay male characters in sf is a historical detective story' (Russ 1990, xxv). Rather than working with an already-defined body of literature, the academic researcher of queer fantasy must work to recognise these texts and create a defined category in which to place them. Effectively, queer fantasy is a hidden subgenre: although these texts are, in theory, available, actually identifying which of the vast numbers of fantasy texts published by presses large and small contain queer characters and elements is difficult, and requires a forensic approach. Problems of cultural definition, authorial intent, and reader interpretation can make it difficult not only to locate queer texts but also to pin down a working definition of 'queer'. The goal of this essay, therefore, is to explore the invisibility of queer fantasy texts both as a theoretical concept and as a practical difficulty faced by researchers, by examining different approaches that have been taken in locating queer fantasy novels. Ideally, this will provide not only a discourse of the hidden power of these texts but also suggest useful methods for researchers working on other forms of queer fantasy.

Queer fantasy's invisibility is no accident. It is rooted in the commonly heteronormative nature of fantasy as a genre, the tendency of queerness to inhabit the margins, and the power and potential that lies within the hidden. As far as the heteronormative nature of fantasy goes, Battis argued that 'fantasy provides a realm where same-sex relations can be presented uniquely and provocatively ... But those same realms ... can also merely recapitulate homophobic and patriarchal tenets' (2007, 260–1). Certainly, despite fantasy's potential as a literature of difference and its potential for dealing with the queer, actual engagement with these themes within the genre has historically been noticeably limited. This has led to a genre position where queer fantasy texts, which by virtue of their queerness already exist in marginal and liminal spaces, are further elided due to fantasy's tendency to maintain a normative framework.



Over and above its fringe position in terms of size of readership, queer fantasy is prone to invisibility as the intersection of two genres: LGBT and queer literature, and fantasy. Kelly wrote in his review of *Bending the Landscape: Fantasy*, a collection of gay and lesbian fantasy short stories:

Since there is a sizeable 'genre' of general gay fiction, the trap is twofold for this book: stories can be fantasy with characters who 'happen to be' gay or lesbian but whose identity doesn't affect the fantasy story; and vice versa, stories with gay and lesbian characters which 'happen to' contain some slight fantasy element that doesn't depend on the identity of the characters. Only a few of the stories manage to fulfil both criteria in ways that are mutually interdependent.

(1997, 42)

Essentially, many of these texts are Heisenberg's queer fantasy: they exist in a position where they can be classified as either fantasy with mild queer elements or queer with only a touch of fantasy. How they are perceived depends primarily on the state of the observer; in both cases, they can be dismissed as not 'true' queer fantasy and classified out of existence. This is not to say Kelly's argument is invalid: it is an important and valuable point about the under-used utility of combining thematic and generic characteristics. Many texts that combine LGBT content and fantasy content do not fulfil the queer potential inherent in such a fusion: for example, exploiting 'the similarity between being gay or lesbian in an often hostile society, and the estrangement brought about by contact with a fantastic unknown' (Kelly 1997, 42). Indeed, some 'queer fantasy' texts would be effectively unchanged if one of those adjectives were removed. However, this also means that those who classify queer fantasy – not just academics, but publishers, reviewers, and readers – can be prone to the 'no true Scotsman' fallacy, applying their personal biases about what queer fantasy 'really' is or should be and including or excluding various texts from that category accordingly. Any queer fantasy text, therefore, has the potential to hide in one of its component genres, 'passing' as primarily queer literature or primarily fantasy. This is not a phenomenon unique to this combination, of course, but it has especial resonance for such texts through their evocation of queer themes of identity elision, labelling, and marginalisation. This problem is compounded by the loose usage of the word 'queer', both as a theoretical concept and as shorthand for a spectrum of gender and sexual identities (such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender: LGBT). Rather than attempting to define 'queer' consistently, researchers on the topic have generally focused on the queer potential of LGBT fantasy: with this in mind, this essay uses the term 'queer fantasy' to refer to fantasy that incorporates LGBT characters and the ways in which this literature can be read and interpreted queerly.

Prior to my own work in this area – which I will discuss in more detail below – there has been one major attempt to catalogue and classify LGBT fantasy: *Uranian Worlds*, by Eric Garber and Lyn Paleo (1983, 1990). This



survey was the first attempt to create a reference work of all extant LGBT science fiction, fantasy, and horror novels and films, and became an extremely influential work among fans of this emergent subgenre. Even in a field full of academic resources and critical scholarship, *Uranian Worlds* would stand out; in queer fantasy, where it is the sole previous attempt to catalogue and discuss these texts, it is priceless.<sup>1</sup> My own work attempts to continue what Garber and Paleo began within a more academic framework and to extend it to include fantasy novels up to the year 2000, covering the dramatic rise in queer content within the genre over that period. The differences in approaches to both locating and classifying queer fantasy texts shed light on the complexities of working with queer fantasy. This may also give future researchers of queer fantasy a useful starting point for constructing their methodologies and examining the theoretical implications suggested by this form of research.

Appropriately for working with a hidden literature, both Garber and Paleo's methodology and my own begin from a position of inclusion. Inclusion is complicated in queer fantasy research. It is necessary to define, at least for practical purposes, which texts are 'queer fantasy' in order to work with those texts and to begin researching the topic at all. This is, in itself, a political act: it cannot separate itself from the issue. To establish criteria for what is and is not queer fantasy is to set a precedent; to construct any canon is to arrogate to oneself the authority to draw generic boundaries: to choose to accept some texts and to reject others. When dealing with a non-evident literature such as queer fantasy the problems of definition multiply. Queer texts, like fantasy, are difficult by their nature to define. A text can be read queerly, but that does not necessarily make it a queer text; similarly, 'the inclusion of gay and lesbian characters or issues does not make a text queer' (Pearson 1999, 2). As Kelly noted in the quote given above, a text that has queer characters or deals with queer themes is not necessarily queer in itself. It is also entirely possible for a text that has nothing to do with gender or sexuality at all to be very queer by, for example, questioning unspoken societal assumptions or breaking down commonly accepted dualisms. Given fantasy's predilection for presenting the strange and unusual, or re-presenting the normal in new ways, many fantasy texts could be considered queer in exactly that fashion, making this both a political and a practical question.

Garber and Paleo, in *Uranian Worlds*, chose to cast the net widely. Their work had the goal of collating and cataloguing alternative sexuality in all science fiction, fantasy, and horror up to its year of publication (1983 for the first edition, 1990 for the second), and gave detailed reviews of all of its entries. As they included texts from all three genres in their compilation, and did not separate them, Garber and Paleo did not need to draw genre boundaries rigidly. In the late 1980s the distinctions between fantasy and science fiction were often vague, where they existed at all, and it was common to see novels dealing with medieval-style quest adventures set on a recognisable post-apocalypse Earth or sorcerers whose magical power is rooted in ancient alien artificial intelligences. Often reviewers found it understandably difficult

to classify these texts. As a general rule, where a text was reviewed as fantasy, labelled fantasy by a publisher, or listed as fantasy in a secondary source, it was considered fantasy for the purposes of my own research.

Garber and Paleo's general tendency to draw their research boundaries loosely is also shown in their inclusion of texts with incidental homosexuality, secondary characters, 'gay best friends' and similar incursions of the queer in *Uranian Worlds*. Rather than using the term 'queer', which was not prevalent in academic usage in 1983, they chose to use the term 'alternative sexuality' and interpret it broadly. There were sufficiently few texts with LGBT elements published in science fiction and fantasy up to 1983 that a relatively slim volume could claim to hold at least the vast majority of such texts, as well as to review them from an alternative sexuality perspective. Since Garber and Paleo gave the dates of their bibliography as 'from AD 200 through 1989' (Garber and Paleo 1990, vii) it appears they intended to cover literally *all* science fiction, fantasy, and horror that met their criteria.

Moving past Garber and Paleo's final date of 1989, the overwhelming increase in depictions of LGBT and queer characters and themes in fantasy during the late 1980s and the 1990s makes the cataloguing of queer fantasy a project of far wider scope. In particular, piecing together an updated queer fantasy canon that could reasonably claim to be comprehensive requires much clearer definitions in order to minimise the potential for interpretative bias in defining things such as whether a text is sufficiently 'queer' to merit inclusion. Therefore, in contrast to Garber and Paleo, rather than dealing with alternative sexuality or queerness in general, my own project includes only those texts published between 1987 and 2000 which 'have a main character that is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or otherwise queer as regards sex, gender and/or sexuality' (2015; emphasis mine). This definition therefore allows the inclusion of relationships, sexual acts, and gender performances that might not necessarily be formally coded as L, G, B, and/or T within their own texts and the socio-cultural frameworks presented therein whilst providing a somewhat narrower framework than that of *Uranian Worlds*. The key distinction here is one of the role of authorial intent. Garber and Paleo relied on the author to label the character in some way or to portray a physical expression of same-sex attraction. As they put it, 'while being flexible in our definition of science fiction and fantasy, we have been more strict in our definition of homosexuality' (Garber and Paleo 1990, xiv). Recognising that readings of authorial intent can be complex and highly subjective, taking a broad definitional approach also permits the inclusion of characters that an author might have deliberately chosen not to label.

This somewhat narrower definition does not, of course, eliminate the question of sources: where to find these queer texts within the larger corpus of fantasy? Although in some research contexts the brute-force solution of simply reading through all available texts and noting those which meet the criteria might be valid, the sheer volume of fantasy makes that both impractical and impossible. Fantasy as a genre is engaged in a lively process of mutual definition between readers, authors, reviewers, and publishers. Garber and

Paleo began their database of texts with the card-index notes of an academic acquaintance, before asking the science fiction and fantasy fan communities of the time to send them the names of recommended texts. Following a review, unless the text failed to meet their criteria, it was then included in *Uranian Worlds*: they gave ‘special attention to finding and annotating works that treat homosexuality with intelligence, validation, and verisimilitude’ (Garber and Paleo 1990, xiii). This approach had a number of advantages. Soliciting recommendations cast the net extremely wide, and allowed a variety of perspectives and submissions to define the catalogue. It was a particularly good approach for a text designed for readers of queer speculative fiction, as it was primarily defined by such readers. Queer speculative fiction was far more of an invisible literature in 1983 (or even 1990) than it is today, and would-be readers were without the benefits of fan websites and Internet searches that would have pointed them towards these texts. *Uranian Worlds* clearly filled a gap in the market. In fact, there was such a need for a resource like it that in 1989, when it was out of print and difficult to find before its second edition, the fan magazine *Gaylactic Gayzette* published a thirteen-page summary of the first edition’s entire bibliography, some 560 texts (Hummel 1989a, 9–21), as a stopgap reader resource. The queer sf fan community was so engaged with *Uranian Worlds* that they were directly responsible for its second edition: the Gaylaxians, a club for gay science fiction fans (and publishers of the *Gaylactic Gayzette*), organised a letter-writing campaign in January 1989 to petition the publisher to release a new edition. Later Paleo wrote to the Gaylaxians to thank them, and informed them that when she and Garber contacted their publisher about a second edition of *Uranian Worlds* ‘the editor informed us that she had received a good number of letter [sic] requesting its release and that she was prepared to negotiate a contract. Your letter-writing was successful’ (Paleo 1989, 10). Continuing the pattern of direct fan engagement, the Gaylaxian newsletter then issued an appeal on Garber and Paleo’s behalf for fans to send them recommendations for the second edition of *Uranian Worlds* (Hummel 1989b, 11). In fact, it would be fair to say that the second edition of *Uranian Worlds* was as much the fans’ work as the authors’: Hummel wrote that *Uranian Worlds* ‘in many ways reflects the variety and vitality of gay fandom itself’ (1989b, 11). This direct engagement with the fan community not only gave Garber and Paleo a sense of what their readers needed and wanted, it also gave them unrivalled access to the perspective of readers of fantasy, science fiction, and horror and allowed them to create a bibliography that was by readers and for readers.

For a number of practical reasons, however, this approach is not well suited to more recent research: fan communities for fantasy are significantly more fragmented and widespread than they were in 1983 or 1990, and are vastly more difficult to contact directly or to survey coherently. Also, as noted, Garber and Paleo were writing for readers as much as for academics: their primary goal was to collate queer science fiction, fantasy, and horror for the benefit of readers searching for it. This means they were not particularly

concerned about bias in their sources: they were trying to be as comprehensive as possible, but did not need to worry about being representative, as they weren't attempting to give a coherent picture of the queer elements of the genres their text covered. With this in mind, my own project draws from the following broad categories of sources: book reviews, literary awards, and lists created by fans and organisations. Each of these has a number of things to recommend them in terms of their utility for future researchers.

Contemporary book reviews are both the easiest and the most difficult of these sources to use: easy in that they are an intuitive place to begin this type of research, and because there are many of them available even within relatively small subgenres; difficult due to the fact that there is rarely a set of reviews that exactly matches the criteria one is looking for. For the period under investigation (1987–2000), there are no comprehensive review sources that dealt solely or primarily with queer fantasy. Instead, it has proven necessary to work within the body of general fantasy reviews and attempt to locate the queer texts – a process akin to panning for gold – looking for the queer within reviews of fantasy, rather than looking for fantasy in LGBT/queer reviews, an approach that is to be recommended for a number of reasons. First, it seems more appropriate, when examining the emergence of the queer into the genre of fantasy, to begin with reviews of fantasy in order to track changes as they arise. Second, there is simply far more fantasy review material available, so it is more likely to offer a comprehensive perspective. Exploring this idea from the opposite direction would be an interesting research proposition which might lead to a fascinating collection of materials.

Within fantasy reviewing, the most expansive resource is the review section of the monthly speculative fiction trade magazine *Locus*. This publication provides the perspective of professional reviewers and experts on the contemporary genre, as well as indirectly highlighting which texts publishers were actively promoting (the texts *Locus* reviews are a subset of those sent in by publishers). Their much shorter but far more comprehensive 'Books Received' listings, which have been reproduced online from 1984 onwards, were also invaluable as the telegraphic five- to ten-word descriptions tend to use recognisable keywords and address core plot elements directly. While a reviewer may have time to be coy and discuss the delicate homoerotic implications of a text in a 1,000-word review, the 'Books Received' listings are far more likely to present a blunt 'Jewish lesbian contemporary fantasy' (for Ellen Galford's *The Dyke and the Dybbuk*).

*Locus* was a very valuable research resource, referencing 39 of my final 107 texts (six of which were *only* uncovered via *Locus* reviews). However, its book-review structure had its drawbacks. In fact some of the longer reviews were so coy about texts' queer content that locating them at all became a very difficult exercise. Attebery wrote in *Science Fiction Studies*' discussion of sexuality in science fiction that academics and critics must 'reset the controls on our gaydar, from "detect" to "decode"' (2009, 385), but frankly for some reviews it is necessary for researchers to remain at the level of 'detect',

and a finely honed 'detect' at that. Carolyn Cushman, reviewing Mercedes Lackey's *Magic's Pawn* on its release in 1989, managed not to mention the fact that the main character is gay despite that being central to, and in fact comprising, most of the plot (1989, 14). In fact, Lackey was 'the first author working with a mainstream press to publish a gay high-fantasy series' (Balay 2012, 929), which would seem deserving of mention from a reviewer. Scott Winnett, reviewing a short story of Ellen Kushner's set in the world of her *Swordspoint*,<sup>2</sup> where the two main characters' gay relationship is a primary focus of their characterisation and of the text, writes of 'Richard St Vier and his friend Alec' (1991, 65). Although the story does describe Alec as Richard's friend, they share a bed, Richard admits he prefers Alec to women, and they explicitly and unambiguously have a sexual relationship: collapsing all of this to 'friend' is unjustifiable. Here we see a tendency of queer fantasy to remain hidden, to inhabit gaps and subtextual spaces and coy phrasings rather than to be explicitly declared. If a reader or a researcher must pay close attention to every single pronoun used in order to identify a queer text as such (true for one review of Catherine Cooke's *Realm of the Gods*), then, realistically, a reader who is not specifically seeking them out is unlikely to notice these texts. This tendency of reviewers also reinforces the research decision to focus on primary characters: if *primary* LGBT characters are this difficult to mention, how many more secondary characters have fallen through the cracks?

It is tempting to give the reviewers the benefit of the doubt, to presume that they simply did not feel the need to focus on queer and LGBT elements every time they arose: certainly there would be the risk of over-focusing on relatively minor queer elements if that were the case. It could also be argued that these coy phrasings were an artefact of the era, and that the reviewer was speaking in a code that all readers would understand. However, neither argument stands up to more extensive analysis. It would make sense for a reviewer to draw attention to queer content only when they considered it relevant to a reading of the text. This approach would cause some problems for a researcher attempting to locate all such texts, but it would be an understandable reviewing decision. What actually seems to have happened, however, is that reviewers 'overcompensated' to the degree that even texts where queer elements were foregrounded and very significant had these elements elided, downplayed, or simply ignored. To give an example: *Science Fiction and Fantasy Book Review Annual 1989* (Collins and Latham 1990) contains a detailed critical analysis of *Swordspoint*, over and above its regular review the previous year (which also did not mention its queer elements). The editors highlight *Swordspoint* as a pivotal text for its year of publication, and spend a significant amount of space discussing it. Somehow they manage to avoid mentioning its gay primary relationship even once.

As for the argument that this coyness is located in a particular era of reviewing and rooted in the sociocultural framework of the late 1980s and early 1990s: even in 2000, Cushman writes (of Chaz Brenchley's 1998–2000 *Outremer* series, with a gay main character and two gay relationships) that

‘a couple of non-standard romantic triangles develop’ (2000, 29). Yes, they do, but the reviewer’s phrasing could mean anything at all! When pressed for space and time, reviewers are more likely to acknowledge a text’s core queer elements, but it is both rare and wonderful to find Faren Miller declaring (of Allan Cole and Chris Bunch’s 1994 *The Warrior’s Tale*) that ‘the unself-conscious portrayal of lesbian passion’ adds to the book’s ‘rough intellectual honesty’ (1994, 67). At some point it is necessary to conclude that reviewers seem to have fallen in love with using understated and teasing phrasing to describe queer texts, to the degree that it affects the honesty of such reviewing and minimises any potential for queer representation.

From another perspective: have the texts become too good at hiding themselves? Arguably readers of queer fantasy have trained themselves to notice such texts and subtexts, out of necessity if nothing else. However, this is an acquired skill and reviewing or writing with the presumption that one’s target audience will have trained themselves to notice every hint is running the risk of sharply limiting one’s potential readership. The fact remains, however, that researchers working on queer fantasy must work to acquire the finely honed gaydar that Attebery mentioned in order to pick up on the more coy and elusive hints in reviews, or risk missing out on texts: a situation where a broad inclusive approach is essential.

One set of sources that attempt to keep the spotlight directly on queer fantasy texts are the various awards in the subgenre that recognise good writing and portrayal of queer/LGBT characters, such as the Lambda Literary Awards, Gaylactic Spectrum Awards, and the Tiptree Awards, which focus on different areas but bring texts to the attention of both reader and researcher. Rather than focusing on the winners, the nomination lists shows which texts critics, publishers, or readers (depending on the nature of the awards) found worthy of note. This makes them a valuable resource in one sense, but also a narrow one. Although award nomination lists provided a large number of potential texts for my research, they had significant overlap with all other sources: the three above-mentioned awards between them provided only two texts for my final shortlist that were not found in other sources. Award nomination lists are essential in building a picture of the subgenre, but are ultimately limited and insufficient on their own: what publishers and critics want to be read and recognised does not necessarily always correspond to what fans are actually reading or authors are writing.

This brings us to the final set of sources it is recommended a researcher consult: lists of queer fantasy novels, whether directly created by individual fans or compiled by professional or amateur organisations. This is similar to the approach Garber and Paleo took, but rather than soliciting submissions from fans – actively engaging them in the process, but potentially shaping the responses in the manner of asking – consulting already extant lists has the advantage of assessing what fans consider part of the queer fantasy subgenre passively. A number of problems arise with this approach regardless, including potential bias, overrepresentation of popular texts, and lists



contaminating one another, but as with *Uranian Worlds* it is useful to cast the net widely to begin with and narrow down the set of 'potentially queer' texts later. The quality and utility of these lists can vary as much as the lists themselves: from individual pet projects not dissimilar to the box of index cards with which Garber and Paleo began their work to lists on the website *Goodreads* where books are voted upon by readers. Consulting extant reading lists allows the inclusion of as many and as varied sources as possible, giving the best chance to locate queer fantasy texts.

There are other sources available, of course, some of which are harder to classify. Some of the most valuable examples from my own research include the website *GLBTFantasy.com*, which has a dedicated team of amateurs who are attempting to review every extant queer fantasy text they know of; the library catalogue of the New York Gay and Lesbian Center Library, with a surprisingly large fantasy collection; recommendations by the staff of the Merril Collection of Speculation, Science Fiction, and Fantasy in Toronto. There are many unexpected sources of material, and once research is operating within defined boundaries it is a valuable strategy to incorporate as many sources as possible for texts that fall within those boundaries. If a novel does not meet the criterion of having a main LGBT/queer character, this quickly becomes evident when working with it. Therefore false positives are not really a concern: rather, false negatives are the worry, where texts that should have made it into a researcher's database might not have. Unfortunately there is no way to tell whether some imaginary text that might be perfect has been overlooked. Therefore the recommended approach is to err on the side of overinclusion and winnow the final lists later.

This process of winnowing began for my project while examining the lists of texts the various sources provided. Some texts were clearly not fantasy, or were marked as only containing minor LGBT characters, and therefore were not considered for the research longlist. Once the initial longlist was compiled from all 45 sources used, the winnowing began in earnest: moving from emphasising inclusion to aggressively practising exclusion. Each of the 376 texts on the longlist had to be researched in more detail, as often the only information about a text from the original source was that it might, possibly, have queer content (due to the perniciously coy reviewers) or that it was placed on a fan-created list of queer fantasy literature (but with no explanation as to why). These uncertainties mean that additional research decisions have to be made that apply the original criterion established in edge cases. Examples from my own research include whether vampires and werewolves, in themselves, permitted a text to be considered queer (ultimately, no, they did not), or whether vague and undefined supernatural evil, a common enough plot element, made a text horror or fantasy (when present by itself, my research considered such texts horror). The researcher effectively becomes a type of identity policeman, declaring texts to be 'sufficiently queer' or 'sufficiently fantasy' to be worthy of inclusion. Through this process of policing, my original longlist of 376 texts dwindled to a reading list of 143,

a far more manageable number, as the texts that would have been irrelevant were excluded; the later process of reading and annotating this reading list enabled a second round of winnowing, where texts that on closer examination did not meet my research criteria were excluded, leaving a final catalogue of 107. From a practical perspective, this exclusion was and is an important and necessary process. Philosophically, however, it seems as though the researcher is dragging this hidden queer fantasy into the light, dissecting it, and casting aside all of the pieces that don't meet with approval. This disquiet is also present in the process of classifying texts based on close reading for ease of reference. Again, this is a valuable research element, but it is also effectively applying definition and classification to texts that are inherently resistant to these things. If LGBT is locatable and queer is not, it is reasonable to ask if the process of labelling actively unqueers these texts, effectively stripping them of their power and potential by pinning them down?

In terms of actual classification methodology, Garber and Paleo set the baseline that my own research adapted. *Uranian Worlds* used a letter coding system which was appropriated as a simple and useful idea, but needed updating to encompass a number of cultural changes. For one thing, a number of their terms would come close to being offensive today ('hermaphroditism', for example), and many of their terms covered a wide range. Trans characters were folded into category X as 'Some form of sexuality that is neither heterosexual nor homosexual', examples of which included 'Transsexuality, hermaphroditism, three-sexed aliens, androgyny, and vampirism' (Garber and Paleo 1990, xiv). Similarly, bisexuality effectively did not exist for Garber and Paleo: they were aware of it, but folded it into categories such as 'F – Lesbianism or female bisexuality is a major component within a work.' They effectively only had three categories: F, M, and X, plus subcategories 'f' and 'm' that flagged texts of only minor interest.

Increasing the granularity of the coding gives more scope for representing differing identities and relationships. The major change made to Garber and Paleo's model for my own work was to distinguish between identities and relationships. For example, a text with a gay-identified or gay-identifiable male character would be coded G; if he had a relationship with another man, then the code M would also be applied to the text. Garber and Paleo would class either situation (or both in the same text) as M. Arguably the authors of *Uranian Worlds* erred in conflating queer acts and queer sexualities. From a practical perspective, their limited coding made it impossible to distinguish between a text where a main character's identification as gay is important to them, the text, and the story, and a text where a male character has sex with a man once, with no particular plot impact. They did, however, make a point of not automatically assuming characters' sexual orientations: it is entirely possible for two female characters to have a sexual relationship in a text and for neither to identify as gay (or even bisexual). This coding-separation of identities and relationships also allows for an examination of how LGBT characters are depicted in relation to those around them: for example, might



these characters be considered 'acceptable' as long as they do not engage in relationships, or conversely might two characters be clearly depicted as being in a relationship but have their sexual identifications be utterly taboo? This increased granularity offers more scope for research.

The irony of increasing the number of labels and classifications in order to work with queer texts is evident: in order to accommodate more diversity in a genre predicated on the shifting complex nature of identities, it is necessary to be more and more rigorous and precise in assigning definitions to the identities one encounters. That being said, the practical utility of labelling these texts in this manner is undeniable: LGBT labels are locatable, queer is not. Readers and researchers alike have reasons to wish to identify and to be able to separate texts with (for example) gay male characters from texts with lesbian main characters, or from texts with transgender main characters who may or may not be gay/lesbian. This tendency is particularly notable in the fan-created lists, with list names such as 'Best Fantasy with Gay Main Characters', 'Best Lesbian Fantasy', and 'The Best LGBTQA Fantasy'. Garber and Paleo (as well as the Gaylaxians) commented that one of the primary purposes of their coding was to enable readers to find the texts that interested them quickly and easily: it is important not to lose sight of this, as it was the core goal of their reference work. In fact, the exclusion and classification of texts by a researcher is just as important as an effort toward inclusion: an overemphasis on one leads to queer fantasy being defined out of existence; and, on the other, leads to accumulating an amorphous mass of texts that becomes impossible to work with. In these research processes, inclusion and exclusion are forces in dynamic tension.

Researching queer fantasy therefore inevitably involves practising inclusion and exclusion, learning how to uncover the hidden and understanding why it has remained so until now, and interrogating the appropriateness of classification. It is, in fact, an initiatory process that requires the researcher to enact and to internalise many of the mechanisms that underlie the hidden power of queer fantasy itself. As the researcher works on the texts, through this means the texts themselves also come to work on the researcher, leading them to new modes of understanding. The evident marginalisation of these texts historically, their downplaying by reviewers, and the strange in-between state in which they exist perched between two genres ought to encourage researchers to appreciate the broader and intrinsically queer themes of liminality, marginalisation, and representation that the texts themselves contain. Even the difficulty of locating these texts encapsulates the hidden nature of queer fantasy and its inherent power and potential for transformation and subversion. As Griffith and Pagel put it in *Bending the Landscape: Fantasy*, the occurrence of the unreal in real places can be just as unexpected as 'the presence of lesbian and gay characters where one has found mostly (presumed) heterosexuals' (1996, 10).

Queer fantasy, then, is fundamentally a literature that gives its researchers the tools they need to engage with it simply by being what it is. It is to be

hoped, as this field continues to develop over time and to present researchers with new challenges and new perspectives, they will be able to draw on the body of research now being established. As this literature expands and changes, there will be a need for a historical-critical foundation of research from which to explore its shifts and developments as a subgenre. However, as publishers, authors, reviewers, and readers alike become more upfront in dealing directly with queer fantasy, its position as a literature of the hidden, and the power that goes with that, may become threatened. Would-be readers of queer fantasy have historically been forced to locate these texts through individual journeys of discovering and uncovering: as Russ put it, ‘when I was sixteen (in 1953) not only was a bibliography like [*Uranian Worlds*] unthinkable, so were most of the books in it’ (1990, xxiii). Although the overwhelming lack of reader resources and the sociocultural frameworks which discouraged this form of literature should not be over-romanticised, their limitations nonetheless allowed (or perhaps required) each reader to construct their own understanding of queer fantasy and their own personal canon. They could experience this literature as both hidden and forbidden and thereby invest it with part of its power and potential. As fans engage in journeys of collaborative discovery, whether by advocating for new resources such as *Uranian Worlds* in the 1980s or creating recommended online reading lists today, and as researchers work to uncover, examine, and classify this hidden literature, creating a more unified canon in the process, the nature of reader experience is irreversibly shifting. The next challenge for queer fantasy researchers will be examining how this subgenre shifts and works to retain its power and potential when it is, at last, no longer hiding in plain sight.

## Notes

- 1 Bosman and Bradford’s *GLBT Literature: A Genre Guide* (2008) includes a chapter on GLBT fantasy novels. However, their goal was to recommend and categorise prominent genre texts for readers and librarians rather than to catalogue the extent of the literature: ‘Because the number of titles in this area [GLBT literature] is vast, the guide focuses on the best and most popular literature available in each genre, theme, and format’ (Bosman and Bradford 2008, 3) They thus limited their selection to award-winning novels only.
- 2 ‘The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death’, *F&SF*, September 1991.

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## 2 Queering magic

### Robin Hobb and fantasy literature's radical potential

*Lenise Prater*

#### Introduction

From *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1954–5) and its representation of Sam and Frodo's relationship to the camp aesthetic of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Baum 1900), fantasy texts have historically lent themselves to queer readings. The genre's convention of re-imagining worlds with different social and cultural values, revising even the laws of physics through magic, opens a space for the representation of worlds that challenge sexist and homophobic assumptions. As Baker argues, '[by] the simple act of constructing a "disturbing," "weird," "impossible" world, fantasy turns "real" into a category – a category that can be opened to radical, progressive change' (2012, 439). The 'real' world is in many ways constructed, by values and 'common sense' understandings; fantasy literature can reveal alternative constructions. Baker adds, however, that 'in the West, the vast majority of fantasy, those multi-volume mega-series, have been reflections, if not products of conservative politics' (2012, 438). The subject of analysis in this chapter is based on exactly one of those 'multi-volume mega-series'; Robin Hobb's *Realm of the Elderlings* series is comprised of three interconnected trilogies; a quadrilogy; several novellas; and short stories.<sup>1</sup> Both progressive and conservative impulses co-exist in Hobb's books and in this chapter I will explore how heterosexist constructions of identity are queered by the magic in Hobb's texts and map the boundary between the progressive and conservative elements of the series. I argue that while the magic of *The Realm of the Elderlings* (a collective name for the series in its entirety) is queer, the representation of queer relationships, while not homophobic, represents a kind of conservative (i.e. monogamous and based on romantic love) vision of queer relationships that exists in an uneasy tension with the queering of identity in the series. The progressive potential of fantasy is great, but can be limited by stereotypes.

Heterosexist logic, to which I will argue Hobb's series presents a challenge, is particularly related to a binary understanding of gendered and sexed bodies, premised on a flawed construction of heterosexual sex. Waldby, in her chapter 'Destruction: Boundary Erotics and Refigurations of the Heterosexual Male Body', sums up the destructive understanding of the male body as 'phallic and

impenetrable' and the female body as 'its opposite, permeable and receptive' (1995, 268). Waldby adds that 'the fantasy of the always hard and ready penis/phallus' has come to '[characterise] the entire surface of the male body' and that in counterpoint 'the fantasy of the soft accommodating and rather indeterminate vagina is synechdochal for the entire female body' (1995, 268). This heteronormative gendering of identity, the construction of the heteromascu-line (see Ingraham 1996) male as an impenetrable, unified and singular subject, is an underlying assumption on which much sexist and homophobic thinking relies. Where Judith Butler argues that performances of gender are linked to heterosexuality (1999, 65–67), and that the 'coherence' of binary genders 'requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality' (1999, 30), Ingraham adds that the construction of the impenetrable, singular subject is inextricably linked to heterosexual masculinity and its performance (1996). It is important, I argue, to destabilise the primacy of this understanding of identity. The magic in *The Realm of the Elderlings*, as I will show, disturbs the boundaries of this unified heteromascu-line subject, dislocating vulnerability from the female body and insisting instead that this is shared by all living beings. Hobb's texts are queer because they provide a set of metaphoric constructions that model a plural or integrated mode of being that does not privilege heterosexist gendered dynamics whereby the feminine female occupies particular roles with many vulnerabilities, and the masculine male has a kind of unified strength.

### **Queer magic: dragons, the 'Wit' and the 'Skill'**

Hobb's particular challenge to gendered and heteronormative representations of identity has not been accounted for by the theory thus far. In *The Realm of the Elderlings* humans, animals and dragons can use different types of magic to create close bonds between humans and animals ('the Wit') or to facilitate mind-to-mind communication between humans, and between humans and dragons ('the Skill'). Examinations of queer fantasy texts have not focused on telepathy or magical bonding, both central to *The Realm of the Elderlings*, and their potential to subvert normative assumptions. Tison Pugh's important work on queer fantasy, for example, has revealed the queer readings made available by the Harry Potter series and Frank Baum's Oz books, but the closest he comes to analysing magic's potential to queer identity is in articulating the parallel between the prejudiced treatment of wizards and werewolves and homophobia (Pugh 2008; Pugh and Wallace 2006, 264–268). Macdonald has also theorised that the representation of intense relationships between werewolves, with the eroticism of the transformation, provides for a queer reading (2011). Further, Lehtonen's discussion of transformations in her recent book, *Girls Transforming: Invisibility and Age-Shifting in Children's Fantasy Since the 1970s*, deals with the ways in which age-shifting and being or becoming invisible can expose or rewrite understandings of gender (Lehtonen 2013). None of these constructions blur the boundaries between two or more different characters or identities to the extent that Hobb's use of telepathy

does, however, with a single character shifting between different forms. Battis comes closest to an analysis of magical connections in his discussion of the ways that words are imbued with magical powers in Duane's *Young Wizards* series (2007), but his work too does not deal with the ramifications of telepathic bonding explored in *The Realm of the Elderlings*.

Anne Balay's discussion of the suppression of all sexuality in YA fantasy literature, and the ways that this very sexuality can pervade the fantasy text at a symbolic level (2012, 924) does, however, inform my discussion of queer magic in *The Realm of the Elderlings*. Balay goes on to discuss the literal representation of gay characters in YA fantasy fiction, but it is exactly the queer magical metaphors that I want to explore in this chapter. In Hobb's work, psychic powers help to reimagine the boundaries between the self and the other, and this destabilisation of the unified masculine subject provides space for an alternative understanding of identity. A queer, feminine or 'Othered' self can co-exist with the more diffuse heteromale subject created by the series, one that recognises the other's difference instead of being in opposition to it. Hobb's series are known for their challenges to the representation of self and other – Deszcz-Tryhubczak argues in her chapter that *The Farseer Trilogy* and *The Tawny Man Trilogy* engender the articulation of alterity, of a version of otherness that is not reducible to binary oppositions (2006). She argues that the first person narrator of these series, FitzChivalry Farseer (Fitz), comes to appreciate 'the animal Other within [his] own personality, the inscrutable Otherness of godlike beings and creatures heralding gods, and the Other represented by an infantile lunatic' (2006, 185). Her argument relies particularly upon the nuanced representation of a genderqueer character who heralds the return of dragons, and a mentally 'disabled' young boy (Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2006, 185), but does not engage explicitly with the queer implications of Hobb's construction of otherness. Carroll, in her discussion of Hobb's *Soldier Son* trilogy, further argues that the opposition between self and other is destabilised in this series, though in this instance it is largely through the nuanced representation of an honour culture which challenges the racist assumptions prevalent in the post-9/11 cultural and political landscape (2007).

In *The Farseer Trilogy* and *The Tawny Man Trilogy*, the two forms of magic, 'the Wit' and 'the Skill', help to reimagine interactions between the self and the world; the narrator, Fitz, is capable of both. The Skill and the Wit are associated with classed and gendered attributes, and the breaking down of the distinctions between these powers over the course of the series challenges the certainty of those distinctions. The reader is introduced to the Skill first, which not only enables communication between humans (and humans and dragons); it allows for one human to influence another. The Skill is linked to the upper classes, as 'the ability for the magics known as the Skill is tied closely to blood relationship to the royal Farseer Line' (2007c, 1), where the Wit is associated with the lower classes.<sup>2</sup> The Skill is most often and dramatically used to violate the interiority of the other and rarely for generating an understanding of otherness in Hobb's work. The Skill can be used as a

weapon, to command another person to do something, to discover another's secrets or to confuse invading armies. It is hence not just representative of a classed distinction between types of magic, it is also associated with its more stereotypically masculine uses; even the name 'the Skill' implies learning and culture where 'the Wit', used to create bonds between humans and animals, is associated with feminine-coded attributes such as cunning and intuition. The latter is also described as a 'natural magic' (2007c, 1), which is opposed to the learning required in order to use the Skill, further suggesting that these powers perpetuate a gendered binary between nature and culture.

This binary gendering is revealed as a cultural construction over the course of the series, however. In the first instance, the fact that Fitz can and does use both suggests that the distinction is a cultural one. This breakdown is achieved partly by demonstrating that the Skill can also be used to heal and to create music: a boy called Thick telegraphs sounds using the Skill such that, when added to the sounds around him, it forms a melody (Hobb 2008c). Where music is not inherently feminine, the use of it here emphasises that the Skill is a multilayered form of communication that is not simply a (masculinised) weapon but is also able to create beauty and art. The model of communication implied initially, where the Skill is used to gain or hold power, shifts once this new knowledge is incorporated. Notably, the Skill becomes a source of vulnerability too, as Fitz is tortured by Skill users at the end of *Royal Assassin*; they attack and violate his mind (2007c, 719–720). The power to control other people's minds is associated with the corollary: if a character can control another person's mind, someone else can control and read theirs. The subject's magical power over the other is mitigated through this acknowledgement of the subject's violability.

The magical communications suggest that subjectivity is formed by an integrated entity comprised of body, mind and experience. The boundaries between interior and exterior essential to the maintenance of the impermeable masculine subject are subverted with this magic. Communicating mind to mind, partly residing in another's head or even swapping bodies are possible using the Skill and the Wit. Identities are not fixed, queer relationships with the world and one another become possible as the magic of Hobb's world undermines that simple distinction between the self and not-self. Subjectivities can reside in multiple locations. King Verity, for example, uses the Skill to shape a stone dragon and pours his experiences and feelings, and ultimately his body, into the dragon (Hobb 2007b). This process of transferring the self to another being in bits and pieces necessarily implies that the self is not contained by the body nor in any single embodied location.

In contrast with the Skill, which enables communication between humans, the Wit provides the human user with the ability to communicate and bond with animals: it is the more feminine magic of the two and is the type of magic that is most essential to Fitz's apprehension of queer identities. The gendering of magic in this world is dislocated from the gendered body; that is, men and women can use these magics. The gendering of these powers is instead



revealed by both the names and specific powers associated with them. As I suggested earlier, where the Wit is associated with intuition and the animal or natural world, the Skill is associated with learning, culture and the royal family. Moreover, the Wit's origin is a mystery, and while the masculine Skill is venerated as the magic of the royal line, the Wit is considered a dirty magic in the society: anyone found using the Wit is hanged, along with the animal with whom they are bonded (2007a, 693). That Fitz is capable of both types of magic undermines the opposition between them; he is something of a 'third term' to the magical framework of the series, one with masculine and feminine modes of apprehending the world. Moreover, the differences between the types of magic are undermined throughout the series, as the Wit can also influence people, who are animals after all. Hobb thus sets up a magical dynamic that is gendered, which she then deconstructs through the character of Fitz and with the slow accrual of details about the magic that undermine these initial distinctions. The healing capabilities of both of these magics, for example, are not revealed until the third trilogy. Hobb rehearses a series of heteronormative and patriarchal assumptions about gender and magic and then progressively reveals how simplistic and flawed they are. Her approach demonstrates how magic can be used to deconstruct not only the representation of good and evil but of the gendered dynamics of magic as well.

In a further challenge to the impermeable subject, the Wit emphasises the interdependent nature of all beings; it makes it possible for Fitz to sense living things around him through sensing the connections between them. As Gatens argues, subverting the construction of the singular insulated subject requires 'acknowledgement of interconnectedness, not a repetition of the (typically masculine) insistence on autonomy. The self only exists in the complex web of its varied relations' (Gatens 1996, 38). Hobb's series articulates this sentiment, that the self is connected to others and cannot sustain a wholly autonomous existence, using the metaphor of the Wit. The main villains in the first series are the Red Ship Raiders, who discover a way to cut the ties between humans and other life, and this process does not render people autonomous, but monstrous. Fitz describes (in the first person) a group of people who have suffered this fate:

All the threads that run back and forth between folk, that twine from mother to child, from man to woman, all the kinships they extend to family and neighbour, to pets and stock, even to the fish of the sea and bird of the sky – all, all were gone.

All my life, without knowing it, I had depended on those threads of feelings to let me know when other live things were about. Dogs, horses, even chickens had them, as well as humans.

(Hobb 2007a, 188)

The stuff of life is described as the connections between living beings. These individuals, called 'forged ones', have had the resonance of their memories stolen away through the use of magic stones. They can remember what has



happened in their lives and will recognise their family, but these things no longer have any emotional meaning or attachment. So forged ones attack and steal without any regard for the suffering they cause – this is what full independence leads to. The King's Fool is forced to touch one of these magical stones and Fitz narrates: '[m]ore precious than blood, the experiences that made him who he was seeped away into the soulless stone' (Hobb 2008b, 465). So the unified subject can disintegrate or be disintegrated; there are no secure boundaries containing the self in this narrative. This can be a positive thing, as with the connections between 'live things', or negative, when this permeability is used to deprive a subject of their agency and their experience. The ultimate threat to subjectivity involves depriving the subject of their *connections* with others: the independent and insular subject valorised by heteronormative patriarchy abuses others and is less than an animal in Hobb's series. This in turn engenders an understanding of more integrated selves who do confine themselves to a binary opposition between masculinity or femininity, which are in many ways 'underwritten by racial codes of purity and miscegenation' (Butler 1999, xxiii). This version of selfhood is not defined against a feminine or racial other, nor dependent on binary oppositions between body and mind.

Further, the boundaries between bodies are not fixed in this series, destabilising the unity of the masculine subject's *body*. As I discuss above, the heterosexist fiction of the male body is based in an understanding that it is impenetrable and that the female body is, by contrast, characterised by its lack and penetrability (Waldby 1995). This symmetrical (constructed) and heteronormative opposition between active and passive sexes has been mapped onto gender roles. These are destabilised in circumstances that appear not to refer specifically to gender, but nevertheless challenge the patriarchal relationships between the self and the other. Fitz and his Wit-partner Nighteyes, a (male) wolf, affect each other physically and mentally: Nighteyes sees things from a more human perspective and Fitz too can share his senses with the wolf and experience the world through smells and sounds that no human can perceive. Their closeness is frowned on by other practitioners of the Wit, who insist on separateness and the distinct integrity of the human as well as the animal subject, claiming animals should not be used for human ends (Hobb 2008a) and implying that the cultural imbalance of power between humans and animals should be carefully managed. Fitz and Nighteyes reject this partial bond as unsatisfying, preferring the shared ebb and flow of knowledges, scents and sounds that their queer companionship makes possible. There can, then, be positive and mutually beneficial integrations of the self with the other. In *The Curse of the Werewolf: Fantasy, Horror and the Beast Within*, Chantal Bourgault du Coudray argues that the wolf:

has long been associated with nature in Western thought [and] [a]ccordingly, the symbiosis of human and wolf in the figure of the werewolf has presented the opposition of nature (represented by the wolf) and culture (represented by the human) in potent terms.

(2006, 3)

Bourgault du Coudray adds that, like monsters more generally, 'the werewolf also appears as a *bridge* between nature and culture, by exceeding both categories and representing the slippages between them' (2006, 3). Fitz is not a werewolf in Bourgault du Coudray's sense of the term, as his body does not actually transform into that of a wolf and he is not represented as monstrous, yet his relationship with Nighteyes certainly suggests slippages between the categories of 'human' and 'animal', and disruptions to the rigid separation of the 'self' and the 'other' more broadly.

The representation of Fitz's bond with Nighteyes as the relationship between two independent beings, as opposed to the werewolf where the wolf and the human exist within the same body, is particularly useful for the conceptualisation of the subject as one whose borders can be contravened in either a positive or a negative way depending on context. The integrations of one being's mind, body and senses with another's are not always represented positively: Fitz is beaten to death in the first series and retreats into his wolf's body in order to survive. They share both mind and body for a time. Fitz loses his humanity and sense of self for several months after being returned to his healed body as a result. This is an unethical move that Fitz is forced into through the machinations of others; where he would have remained dead, his friends convince him to survive using his magic. So, while this sharing of bodies goes too far, Fitz and Nighteyes also explicitly reject the kind of separation that other Witted beings practise. The narrative, then, proposes a balanced integration of selves that is satisfying for both parties but does not impinge on each other's power as individuals. This can be read as a very positive metaphor for embodied sexual experience, one where power and embodied boundaries need to be negotiated between individuals according to their circumstances and preferences. This vision is a decidedly queer one too, as it refuses to affirm heterosexist binary understandings of the self. Hobb offers a nuanced narrative of bodily and subjective integrity, rather than resorting to stereotyping, one that registers the importance of context and individual experience.

Nor is this connection between the Wit and sexual partnerships ambiguous in the narrative: Hobb draws parallels between the Witted relationship between a human and an animal and marriage, emphasising how the establishment of ethical and unethical uses of magic form a metaphor for ethical and unethical sexual relationships. When Fitz meets with practitioners of the Wit, they are shocked to hear that Fitz had bonded with a dog when he was still a child. Black Rolf tells him it is 'a perversion. As well allow a little girl to be wed off to a grown man' (Hobb 2007b, 140). The partnership between witted partners, human and animal, is thus described in terms similar to those of a romantic relationship. So the nuanced narrative that champions sharing bodily and psychic energies in a manner that does not impinge on each other's space or rights, while still gaining from the shared experience, provides a model for romantic relationships that do not rely on patriarchal disparities in power.

In Hobb's series, the blurring of boundaries between subjects extends beyond humans bonding with wolves – humans and dragons also experience a kind of

cross-pollination between individuals, on a bodily and psychic level, that is represented as mutually beneficial and contributes further to the progressive deconstruction of the unified self in this series. Humans who have a lot of contact with dragons become Elderlings. These humans have been granted height, long life spans and beautiful scales on their faces and bodies, and in one case even wings. In the final quadrilogy of the series, dragons have been reborn into the world stunted, as they have been kept trapped in an earlier stage of development for too long. Human ‘keepers’ look after the dragons and take them in search of more comfortable living spaces – living in such close proximity to the dragons means that they too grow taller and develop scales. The dragon Mercor explains that ‘Elderlings can be created by dragons, deliberately. Sometimes, as is happening with our keepers, humans undergo changes simply by virtue of extensive contact with us’ (Hobb 2010, 341). Proximity alone is enough to disturb clear boundaries between dragons and humans, and humans are enriched by this contact. Indeed, the pairing of humans and dragons is of mutual benefit. Even as the dragons influence the humans physically and mentally, endowing them with the magic of the Skill and longer life spans, so the humans can influence the dragons too. In the last quadrilogy in the series, the dragons have emerged from their cocoons weak and unable to fly. Several dragons cannot even communicate, but through bonding with humans they regain their ancestral memories and speech and even the ability to fly. This transgression of boundaries between self and other is thus presented as mutually beneficial, indeed wondrous. Bodily and emotional integrity are not to be zealously maintained (nor can they be, in this world) but, rather, the links between and incorporations of others can empower both.

In the context of the problem of gendered power, this is a model for interpersonal interactions where queer sexual pleasures *can* make sense. Here there are no heterosexist passive and active roles, nor is the human or the dragon defined as a vessel or hole that the other one fills. These are mutual interpenetrations of differently intelligent beings. The characters involved, both the dragons and their ‘keepers’ in the *Rain Wilds Chronicles*, are initially at odds with one another. Both try to assert their own superiority to the other: the name the ‘keepers’ implies that they are merely tending livestock and these humans do try to control their charges as best they can. The dragons in turn think of humans as attendants who should worship dragons as the superior species (Hobb 2009, 350). Each group goes through a process whereby they begin to respect one another’s difference and the ways that they can enrich one another’s experience. They valorise a respectful, and queer, set of relationships that do not rely on heterosexist understandings of power.

### **The king’s Fool: understanding genderqueer identities through magic**

More explicitly, Hobb does, moreover, subvert the divisive boundaries between genders largely through the character of the king’s Fool, who is of uncertain

gender, and demonstrates exactly what is at stake in the performance of gender roles. This character is introduced to Fitz as the king's Fool in black and white motley, and performs a masculine identity. The Fool, however, performs multiple genders and identities throughout the series. Firstly ze<sup>3</sup> is the Fool, then a young woman and shopkeeper called Amber in *The Liveship Traders* trilogy and then the effeminate Lord Golden in the *The Tawny Man Trilogy* series. The question of the Fool's gender is never answered definitively. These shifts, and the indeterminacy of the gender of the Fool's body, destabilise gendered distinctions and boundaries. Even as the genderfluid character of the Fool becomes the woman Amber in *The Liveship Traders* series, the protagonist of this series, Althea, assumes the guise of a boy in order to work on a ship. Gender becomes more fluid and different positions can be occupied depending on which gender is more appropriate to the circumstance. The vulnerability and invulnerability attached to female and male bodies become performances in this construction.

Butler famously argues that gender is performative rather than natural and that this is nowhere more obvious than when it is performed by the 'opposite' sex, as in drag. She adds that gender performance is a 'strategy' and that this term:

suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs. Hence, as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right.

(1999, 190)

Initially, this notion of rigidly defined gender is represented in Hobb's work. The Fool must maintain the guise of whichever gender ze chooses in order to be accepted in the human world. The gender confusion is the main source of discord between the Fool and Fitz. At one point the minstrel Starling tells Fitz that 'The Fool is a woman. And she is in love with you' (2007b, 551). Fitz later finds out that the Fool has also represented zirsself as a woman called Amber in Bingtown and even carved a figurehead of a ship in Fitz's likeness (Hobb 2008c, 317). He feels betrayed and violated by the Fool/Amber's actions, particularly the implication that zir identity is not fixed, that Fitz's friend is not who he thought ze was (Hobb 2008c, 320). Indeed, Fitz's reactions demonstrate what I have been arguing, that undermining the integrity or unity of heteromascu-line identities destabilises the claims of the hegemonic male subject to power over, and knowledge of, those constructed as other. Moreover, the reader is positioned to think that Fitz is being petty here, as Fitz, while he walks away from the Fool, '[fingers] all [his] grievances, numbering them to [himself]' (Hobb 2008c, 320). The hurt Fitz feels is represented as foolish and petty, further establishing that the heterosexist masculine paradigm is obstructive.

Crucially, it is magic that makes it possible for Fitz to apprehend and accept the Fool's queer identity. Fitz brings the Fool back from the dead by using the Wit to heal zir (Hobb 2008b, 633–636). They swap bodies and Fitz spends a night directing the flows of the body to heal the Fool's wounds. Fitz muses that the Fool is not completely human:

That night, I confronted completely his strangeness. I thought I had known him. In those hours of rebuilding, I realized and accepted him as he was. That, in itself, was a revelation. I had always believed we were more alike than different. It simply was not true. He was human only in the same way that I was a wolf.

(Hobb 2008b, 634)

Using this magical way to inhabit the body of another, Fitz can grasp the Fool as simply different (strange) and accept that difference as one that he could not grasp in his own terms: the Fool is not human in any simple way. Indeed, zir humanity is based, using the metaphor of how Fitz is partly a wolf because of his close bond with a wolf, on a type of cross-pollination through the Fool's closeness to the other species. This problematically suggests that intersex/genderqueer people are not human – they are so different as to be from another species. This problem is mitigated by this text's commitment to destabilising the valorisation (and simplicity) of the term 'human', suggesting that humans are not a species apart and above from other living beings. Because Fitz is capable of both the Wit and the Skill, he is empowered to greater understanding of alternative modes of being. He learns that his friends, particularly those of a different species and/or indeterminate gender, are not easily contained by his definitions and are instead irreducible to the binary otherness that he initially imposes on them.

### **The boundaries of Hobb's queer vision: conservatism in literal queer relationships**

Perhaps once one realized how deeply one could bond with a creature as foreign as a dragon, all forms of human love seemed more acceptable.

(Hobb 2013b, 162)

As I have argued, the series does positively represent queer identities and, as the quote above suggests, the final *The Rain Wild Chronicles* quadrilogy promotes acceptance of queer relationships. However, the conservative impulses of the fantasy genre (see Baker 2012), present throughout much of the history of the genre, resurface here. First because it is not until the final quadrilogy that queer sexualities are featured; there are very few same-sex 'relationships' represented in the first three trilogies, and those that do feature are either exploitative or objects of disgust. I put 'relationships' into quotation marks here, as some of these involve older men raping or molesting young boys

(Hobb 2008d, 38; 2008f, 40). These texts do not take advantage of the framework to provide a more nuanced literal representation of same-sex relationships; indeed, these first three trilogies risk reiterating harmful stereotypes. It is in the final quadrilogy, featuring a group on a quest to take flightless dragons to higher ground, where Hobb complicates this through the development of several homosexual relationships. As these characters develop connections to the dragons and come to understand their humanity and relationship to the world in non-binary terms, so too do they come to understand that relationships between humans are more diverse than their heteronormative culture suggests. Even here, however, queer relationships are represented in conservative terms, as monogamous and based on romantic love.

In *The Tawny Man Trilogy*, Fitz discovers there is a rumour he is having a relationship with Lord Golden (who Fitz knows as the Fool), and is disgusted. Fitz plays the role of his servant, and given that Lord Golden is effeminate and, in one memorable incident, kisses a young man at a party (Hobb 2008a, 398), the connection between them becomes suspicious. While the text establishes that Fitz is an unreliable narrator, that he often makes bad decisions, the representation is certainly ambiguous thanks to its affirmation of stereotypes about same-sex relationships as 'disgusting' and threatening. Waldby argues that the heterosexist representations of women's bodies as inherently vulnerable and men's bodies as inherently powerful and impermeable is what has justified the 'repeated acquittals of men charged with violent assault and even murder on the basis of "homosexual advance"' (1995, 269). If men's bodily boundaries are impermeable, even the threat of contravening these boundaries is taken very seriously. Notably, this makes anal sexual activities unthinkable and abhorrent (Waldby 1995, 272), and Fitz's response naturalises this construction of anal eroticism as threatening. This, of course, is before the night spent healing the Fool's body and understanding *zir* difference, but this does not quite undermine Fitz's panicked response to a perceived sexual threat.

By contrast, Dragon Keepers Sedric and Carson are very positively represented as a gay couple in the final quadrilogy. Their relationship grows and deepens; here we finally see an unambiguous representation of a queer relationship, one that resists the earlier negative stereotypes associated with queer couples. There is one other homosexual relationship represented, between two younger men – Davvie and Lecter – but the sympathetically portrayed Carson tells them when they argue in the final book that 'he thought they were choosing one another by default rather than based on a true attraction' (Hobb 2013a, 349). The common theme in all of the positively represented romantic relationships in Hobb's work, both homosexual and heterosexual, is that they are all monogamous. While one character, Jerd, is represented as promiscuous – no parts of the text are focalised through this character and she is portrayed as very shallow. For example, when she begins miscarrying she '[enjoys] the attention' and 'the drama' (Hobb 2010, 503) until she discovers the implications of her cramps. Ultimately, Sedric and Carson's monogamous relationship aligns with Baley's analysis of Roeder's *Someone is Watching*,



where she argues ‘gay people are indistinguishable from straight people in every way except that of their sexual preference’ as the novels emphasise ‘permanent partnerships, on love before sex, and on non-coital intimacy’ (Balay 2012, 927). The representation of sexual intimacy within heterosexual and homosexual couples is in similar terms in Hobb’s work. While queer sexual desires and sex scenes are explicitly described, and these scenes are only implied in the novels Balay discusses, the emphasis is on love and permanent partnerships. Other sexual dynamics are represented negatively throughout the series, thus insisting on the primacy of heteronormative logic and structures which promote monogamy as well as heterosexism.

Further, lesbian relationships are entirely absent from Hobb’s series. Indeed, the primacy of heterosexual pairings in raising children is reiterated forcefully in *The Rain Wild Chronicles*. When Jerd miscarries Bellin helps her ‘efficiently’ and is described as sympathetic as her face ‘[darkens] with sorrow’ when the stillborn baby arrives (Hobb 2010, 506). Bellin then tells all of the young women in the group that they had better ensure they have a man to look after them if they are going to have sex and risk a pregnancy, saying that ‘You don’t have a partner ready to put it on the line for you, to the last drop of blood in his body, well, then you’re a fool if you spread your legs’ (Hobb 2010, 504). This particular argument stresses the representation of women as vulnerable and in need of a protector, and it also denies any suggestion that women might help one another in raising children. It also does not suggest that an unwanted baby might go to a homosexual couple. Thus, the potential of the fantasy genre is only partially taken advantage of in Hobb’s work – the magic queers understandings of identity but the literal representation of queer relationships, while not perhaps overtly homophobic, is rather conservative.

## Conclusion

Hobb’s series demonstrates how a nuanced magical framework, one that blurs binary distinctions between ‘self’ and ‘other’, can facilitate a renegotiation of gender identities and queer relationships. While the series does not entirely challenge myths and stereotypes about queer sexualities, it nevertheless illuminates problematic assumptions and uses fantasy techniques to de-naturalise patriarchal and heteronormative assumptions. In many ways, this series confirms Mallan’s argument that ‘[w]hereas “gay identity” has become almost domesticated in its oft-repeated reassurance to mainstream society that “we are just like you”, queer remains edgy and threatening in its refusal to blend in or be tolerated by the dominant culture as simply good-natured eccentricity’ (2009, 126). The literal gay relationships in the series are not nearly as transformative or challenging to heteronormativity as telepathy and magical bonding are. In dealing with fantasy literature generally, it seems that magical queering, symbolic or metaphoric queering made available by the conventions of the genre, are often more radical than the literal engagement with sexualities carried out by these texts.

## Notes

- 1 At the time of writing, Robin Hobb's Realm of the Elderlings series includes three trilogies: *The Farseer Trilogy* (1995–1997), *The Liveship Traders* (1998–2000) and *The Tawny Man Trilogy* (2001–2003), and one quadrilogy, *The Rain Wild Chronicles* (2009–2013). While the series are listed here in chronological order, the first and third trilogies, *The Farseer Trilogy* and *The Tawny Man Trilogy*, are narrated in the first person by Fitzchivalry Farseer – a bastard son of the ruling family of the Six Duchies. These two trilogies are largely set in the egalitarian and medievalist lands of the Six Duchies. The second and fourth series, *The Liveship Traders* and *The Rain Wild Chronicles*, are set in the Rain Wilds and in Bingtown, which has aesthetic and cultural markers that resemble the Victorian era in England, and are narrated in the third person with few crossover characters.
- 2 The 'Legend of the Piebald Prince' tells of how the Wit was introduced into the royal line by a commoner. A Farseer Princess had sex out of wedlock with a groom called Sly o' the Wit and had a Witted child (2007c, 715–716). Hobb recently told this story in full in a novella called *The Wilful Princess and the Piebald Prince* (2013b).
- 3 For ease of expression and clarity I have adopted the gender-neutral pronouns 'ze' and 'zir' to describe the character who is variously called the Fool/Amber and Lord Golden.

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### 3 'It takes a pack to raise a child'

#### Anti-conservatism and non-normative families in Gail Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* series

*Katharine Harris*

Immortality makes for some pretty peculiar genealogy, I must say.  
(Carriger 2012, 26)

Set in an alternate nineteenth century, Gail Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* series (2009–2012) imagines a supernatural family with 'peculiar genealogies'. Carriger describes a family whose supernatural abilities and personal inclinations enable them to formulate an imperfect resistance to the socially conservative norms that surround them. With humans, vampires, and werewolves all positing differing versions of normativity in this fantasy steampunk world, the central family expands over the course of five novels from heterosexual couple to werewolf pack and then beyond, ultimately formulating a complex and mutually supportive unit that certainly does have 'some pretty peculiar genealogy'. Interacting with those twenty-first-century conservative social politics which prioritise the nuclear family – whether homo- or heterosexual – as well as with twentieth- and twenty-first-century queer theories of kinship, the *Parasol Protectorate* uses its supernatural characters to suggest that the definition of family can include a wide range of relationships and that this range can be the locus of a resistant politics of belonging.

Carriger's first *Parasol Protectorate* novel, *Soulless* (2009), introduces her protagonist Alexia Tarabotti. Alexia is a soulless 'preternatural'; she has the power to temporarily remove the supernatural abilities of a vampire or werewolf. This first novel formulates a heterosexual love plot between Alexia and Conall Maccon, an aristocratic werewolf.<sup>1</sup> Alexia's friend Lord Akeldama is also introduced, a flamboyant, gay vampire. With Alexia and Conall's marriage at the end of *Soulless*, the stage seems set for a private, nuclear, heterosexual family unit. However, the second novel, *Changeless* (2010b), reveals that Alexia and Conall are the 'alphas' of a werewolf pack, figures who take broadly parental, and sometimes fraternal, roles in relation to a very large werewolf family. This family is not exclusively biologically connected, even in the supernatural sense; Conall did not necessarily turn the members of his pack into werewolves himself, nor is he genetically connected to them as a biological parent. Indeed, supernaturals are unable to conceive biological

children. This becomes contentious in *Changeless* and *Blameless* (2010a), when it is revealed that Alexia is pregnant. Suspicions of infidelity are proved to be false with the help of a network of trusted friends of various species, and in *Heartless* (2011) the heterosexual couple are reunited, while Alexia continues to be frustrated by her pregnancy and the ‘infant inconvenience’ (Carriger 2010a, 54). She also continues to participate in various adventures, finally giving birth inside the body of a giant octopod killing machine, with a cross-dressing lesbian human (Madame Lefoux), a comatose werewolf (Biffy), and her husband as her midwives.

Through *Blameless* and *Heartless*, it becomes apparent that the child – because its species is unknown, being the genetic offspring of a preternatural and a werewolf – is at risk from the vampires. The solution to this, various family members conclude, is to have the child formally adopted by Lord Akeldama. He is a vampire, so the other vampires would not harm his child. Alexia’s initial panic that she will ‘[lose] possession of my own child’ is ultimately soothed by the fact that this is the best protection for Prudence (Carriger 2009, 6). Alexia and Conall, not wishing to be absent during their ‘metanatural’ daughter’s childhood, move their werewolf pack in next door to Lord Akeldama, creating a secret passageway between the pack’s and the vampire’s homes. In the final book, *Timeless* (2012), the family is united, vampires, werewolves, preternatural, metanatural, and humans, living together mostly harmoniously – although Prudence’s metanatural abilities are somewhat challenging – and in mutual support.

The family is not unproblematic, nor does it present itself as a tidy solution to questions of queer and non-normative kinship structures. Somewhat ambivalent, for example, is the fact that the characters’ freedom to participate in these non-normative structures is a product of wealth and social status; Lord and Lady Maccon are more able to resist norms than, for example, their much poorer actor friends Ivy and Ormond Tunstell. Non-normativity and, by extension, resistance to dominant discourses, Carriger suggests, is not simple to achieve, nor is it a straightforward solution to many complex problems. However what the Tarabotti-Maccon-Akeldama-*et al.* family does suggest, is the centrality of the family to a whole range of conservative discourses, thereby also situating it as a possible resistance to them in terms of gender, sexuality, and generationality.

It is also important to note the problematic status of the term ‘family’ in relation to queer or non-normative politics. Theorists such as Judith Halberstam, Judith Butler, and David Eng are often, although not invariably, critical of the term, observing its relationship to disciplinary structures of power and its apparent prioritisation of generational descent. Halberstam suggests that the word ‘family’ inherently implies an:

authenticating notion of longevity [which] renders all other relations meaningless and superficial and family ties, by virtue of being early bonds, seem more important than friendships ... I would like to advocate

a 'forgetting of family' in a number of different scenarios in order to allow for the possibility of other modes of relating, belonging, caring, and so on.

(Halberstam 2007, 317)

Friendships are significant in the *Parasol Protectorate*. Biffy, a young werewolf, to whom Alexia – Lady Maccon – is technically an alpha, and thus a kind of parental figure: 'rather adored Lady Maccon, and had from the moment she first appeared'. His (platonic) adoration for her stems from before he was a werewolf, and before they were connected by familial bonds, and Biffy's affection is entirely reciprocated, precisely on its own friendly terms (Carriger 2012, 86–87). Their friendship, like that between Alexia and Lord Akeldama, and between Conall and Professor Randolph Lyall, suggests that this 'family' might exceed Halberstam's interpretation of that term, because it incorporates different modes of relating. Members of this complex unit are not obliged to take on any specifically or traditionally 'familial' relation to one another; friendships are not marginalised by the umbrella term 'family'.

And friendship is not the only alternative 'mode of belonging' that the *Parasol Protectorate* suggests is possible. For example, when Conall's great-great-great-granddaughter asks to speak to him alone:

Lord Maccon rolled his eyes around, as if only now noticing the crowd. He was a werewolf after all; he naturally acclimatized to the pack around him, even if that pack had got a little bizarrely dressed of late.

'Well, what I know, my wife and Randolph know. And, unfortunately, what Alexia knows, Lord Akeldama knows. However, if you insist, we could put out the drone. ... And the cat, I suppose.'

(Carriger 2012, 33)

Gruffly (but with more affection than his words might imply), Conall acknowledges the unstructured nature of his family unit. It is not that all members are equally connected, or that there is a logical, or biological, system. Instead, there are collections of friendships, affections, bonds of trust, shared knowledge, sexual relationships and so on, which diversely connect to form a much more complex unit than a 'family' that is monolithically bonded by certain specifically '*familial*' attachments. We might see this precisely as the 'other modes of relating, belonging, caring, and so on' of Halberstam's argument, united under the problematic term 'family'. About exactly the same room of people, Alexia thinks 'everyone there was family after all', her word 'all' even including the 'drone' (and the cat) about whom Conall was uncertain (Carriger 2012, 36). Each member's view of what constitutes the 'family' is slightly different.

Halberstam's argument is an important one; in many situations queer politics can be limited by the adherence to a historical conception of 'family'.

Without clearly stating a political position, however, the *Parasol Protectorate* suggests that the word ‘family’ is here used to mean something unreliably distinct from both its traditional and ongoing problematic usages. I therefore use ‘family’ to describe them, acknowledging both its limitations and its possibilities.

### The priority of the nuclear family

Various normative families surround the central family in the *Parasol Protectorate*. There are norms for humans, norms for vampires, and norms for werewolves, and the Tarabotti-Maccon-Akeldama-*et al.s* resist all of them. Their friends the Tunstells are a nuclear human family, a heterosexual couple who were married in secret at the end of *Changeless* and have twins in *Timeless*. This coheres with the basic definition of the nuclear family: a family unit that is comprised of two, usually legally married, adults and their children. The Tunstells’ nuclearity represents one kind of norm in the society of the series. However, beyond her familial structure, Ivy’s normativity also manifests itself in her conservative politics, with her belief that Lord Akeldama is ‘after all, too outrageous for fatherhood. The vampire side of his character being, in Ivy’s universe, far less a thing than his scandalous comportment and flamboyant dress’ (Carriger 2012, 71). Lord Akeldama is both gay and camp, and therefore, in Ivy’s normative conception of heterosexual families, he is not suitable for fatherhood. Again, class also has a problematic bearing here. Lord Akeldama’s wealth and social status mean that his flamboyance is always conducted with the utmost taste, in contrast to Ivy’s less wealthy and garish bad taste (not least in hats). Ivy’s specifically linking it to his abilities as a parent indicates her broadly conservative outlook. However, Alexia later notes that in liking ‘drama and color’ Prudence is ‘very much Lord Akeldama’s daughter’ and imagines father and daughter as ‘[t]wo peas in a very sparkly pod’ (Carriger 2012, 92, 65). Evidently Prudence is fond of and shares her father’s flamboyance; rather than it being a negative influence, it is a means through which father and daughter have bonded. Normative assumptions about parenting are implied to be ill suited to the non-normative family.

Ivy’s attitude is synonymous with those of the central family’s human neighbours, who also view the Tarabotti-Maccon-Akeldama-*et al.s* as scandalous. After the family causes a ruckus in the street, Alexia notices their neighbours, the Colindrikal-Bumbercrunchers, ‘glaring daggers at her from their front door’ and:

she heard the Colindrikal-Bumbercrunchers’ door close with a definite click of censure.

‘Oh, dear’, said Lady Maccon upon attaining the relative safety of Lord Akeldama’s drawing room. ‘I do believe we have become *those* neighbors.’  
(Carriger 2012, 30, 31; original emphasis)

Being ‘*those neighbors*’ is not problematic for this family, given their social status, but it does suggest that they are behaving in ways that are not concordant with the humans’ social norms. And this defiance of normativity is viewed ‘with a definite click of censure’.

The unusual nature of the family in contrast to the humans is repeatedly asserted by Alexia’s human sisters, with Felicity’s frequent despair: “Why did you *have* to involve yourself with the supernatural set, sister?” (Carriger 2010b, 168; original emphasis). What Felicity does not realise is that the family’s lack of normativity is not a consequence of their being part of ‘the supernatural set’; they also resist many of the expected norms of supernatural life. Werewolves live in packs – as with Conall’s pack initially. Vampires often live in hives – Lord Akeldama is unusual in being a ‘rove’ and therefore not cohabiting on familial terms with other vampires. Packs and hives are generally large-scale extended families who share emotional bonds but not necessarily genetics, i.e. human or supernatural biological links (though vampires mostly stay near their makers). However, vampires, humans, *and* werewolves cohabiting all together is unusual in this world, because the two supernatural species have always been clearly separated (Carriger 2011, 304). Unusually, however, Conall’s pack vacate their home, moving in next door (and connectedly) to a vampire household (Carriger 2011, 305). Vampires and werewolves manage to live together after all, despite the fact that it should be impossible. Even within the fantasy-gothic aspects of the world of the *Parasol Protectorate*, the Tarabotti-Maccon-Akeldama-*et al.* family resists the structures dictated by this world’s norms.

The complexity of the *Parasol Protectorate* family goes beyond simply resisting human and supernatural normativity within the novels, and into a wider interaction with social politics. Foucault’s interpretation of sexuality and kinship places the development of modern conceptions of family at the moment in which discourses of sexuality were channelled into state-sanctioned alliances, when marriage became a means of controlling sexuality rather than a political ‘*deployment of alliance*’ (Foucault 1978, 106; original emphasis). The modern family, according to Foucault, formed the meeting point between kinship relations and sexual desire, the means by which both could be made acceptable by being acknowledged and understood through formal infrastructures of law. These state-sanctioned alliances, i.e. marriage and parenthood – ‘the husband-wife axis and the parents-children axis’ – were the means by which sexual and generational relationships both became regulated by the legal system (Foucault 1978, 108). Thus, heterosexual marriage and its concordant biological reproduction (and by extension the nuclear family) are imbricated in structures of power that reinforce the narrow formation of the state and social lives within conservatively managed boundaries. Foucault identifies the moment at which the state-sanctioned certain sexualities and relationships as ‘normative’, and certain sexualities and relationships as outside of these conservatively defined ‘norms’.

Legal marriage, in the *Parasol Protectorate*, is apparently only available to heterosexual couples. All of those couples – Ivy and Tunstell, Alexia’s mother and stepfather, and even the Colindrikal-Bumbcrunchers – are biologically reproductive.<sup>2</sup> Even Alexia and Conall have a biological child, when this was thought to be impossible. In the novels, state recognition is limited exclusively to those alliances which are heteronormative and biologically reproductive. This might suggest an implicit acceptance of the legal regulation of family to a nuclear unit. The monolithic construction of legal marriage might be read as controlling characters’ social and sexual interaction via the legal focus on ‘the husband-wife axis and the parents-children axis’.

However, there are a number of ways in which this implicit commitment to normative social and sexual power relations is undermined by the Tarabotti-Maccon-Akeldama-*et al.* family. It is larger and more complex than these two axes of state-sanctioned power. Lord Akeldama is legally involved in Prudence’s life, meaning that the ‘husband-wife axis’ is not in alignment with the ‘parents-children axis’; there are more legal parents than the nuclear heterosexual couple. This parent is not biologically connected to his daughter, so their relationship is resistant in that respect too. Sexuality and sexual intercourse are visible in different forms in the series and are certainly not regulated by the expectations of heterosexual marriage. Biffy’s sexual and emotional relationships with Lord Akeldama and Professor Lyall, for example, different figures within his family, suggest that sex exceeds the legally recognised parental unions that are implied by Foucault’s paradigm. This family is an expansive and implicit site of resistance to those structures of power that restrict sex, sexuality, the family, and kinship to a nuclear, state-sanctioned unit.

In the twenty-first century, some time after Foucault’s arguments were made, the status of marriage as a state-sanctioned norm has shifted. However, in several sectors it continues to have conservative and normative political associations. Lisa Duggan argues that the legalisation of equal marriage, rather than being a radical legal recognition of non-normative lifestyles, can actually become implicated in a form of homonormativity, which she terms ‘gay “normality”’; normative structures of family are opened up to queer-identified people, but only within certain strict parameters (Duggan 2003, 44). Her fear that this will result in a loss of ‘collective, democratic public culture’, participates in the idea that queer politics becomes ‘privatised’ by the focus on equal marriage. She suggests that, rather than exploring the different affective relationships that can form part of queer life and queer politics, equal marriage potentially limits queer politics to a socially conservative and homogenous sphere (Duggan 2003, 62).

In the novels, kinship structures exceed legal regulation, but ‘gay “normality”’ is also resisted. Vampires of both genders are likely to be attracted to people of the same gender (Lord Akeldama and Countess Nadasdy), which Lord Akeldama summarises: ‘La *honeysuckle*, you are well aware that we *here*



are all, in our own special way, *deviants* in our penchants' (Carriger 2011, 117; original emphasis). But the vampires' familial structures are not homonormative. They are more complex than simply nuclear, and the vampires' 'deviances' – a useful word in discussing resistance to norms – do not often include monogamy (unlike the werewolves). The Westminster queen has ongoing sexual affairs with several women in her hive, and these women are known to have affairs with each other, as in the implied case of Madame Lefoux, Mabel Dair, and the unfortunate Asphodel. The lack of monogamous sexual commitment in these families, their scale, and their dominantly matriarchal structure, all suggest that vampire kinship, in the *Parasol Protectorate*, does not replicate the conservative 'gay "normality"' of Duggan's argument.

### Non-normative gender roles

Another form of conservative familial normativity that is sometimes resisted and sometimes reinforced in the *Parasol Protectorate* is the gendering of familial roles. Prudence's three co-parents assert and resist gender normativity. Alexia does not adhere to traditional terms of motherhood: 'For goodness sake, I may be soulless and I am, admittedly, not precisely maternal, but I am by no means heartless' (Carriger 2010a, 6). Her unusual pregnancy and Prudence's birth inside the body of a giant mechanical octopus have been discussed by Mike Perschon, who notes Alexia's ongoing independence subsequent to her becoming a mother (Perschon 2013). Angela McRobbie explores the twenty-first century's 'ubiquitous figure of the middle-class, professional, wife and mother' whose dominance as a cultural figure creates elevated standards to which mothers are expected to aspire. Mothers in contemporary society, suggests McRobbie, are expected to be professionally successful, personally attractive, and endlessly patient with their children (McRobbie 2013, 119). Alexia achieves most of these, with varying degrees of success, but these high standards of maternal aspiration rely on sharing her parental responsibilities with Conall and Lord Akeldama – as well as with other family members. This is not part of McRobbie's paradigm. Indeed, the mothers to whom McRobbie refers are part of the emphasis on the nuclear family in contemporary conservative politics, dictated by the 'constant advocacy of stable (if also now flexible and gay) forms of family life' (McRobbie 2013, 121). As McRobbie goes on to acknowledge, that 'flexibility' remains limited to state-recognised marital alliances; these contemporary striving mothers, it seems, are restricted to their nuclear families.

In contrast to this, at one point, Lord Akeldama knocks on Alexia's door with Prudence in tow: "'Oh darling, good evening!" said her mother, trying to look pleased.' Lord Akeldama invites her to join him and their daughter for a walk, which Alexia refuses because she 'really [is] quite exhausted' (Carriger 2012, 64). Recognising the conflicting demands on Alexia's time, Lord Akeldama's response is magnanimous as he 'parade[s] off' with their



daughter ‘prepared, nay delighted, to stop and be admired by many a curious bystander’ (Carriger 2012, 65). As Alexia herself puts it:

The werewolves have a saying. Do you know it? ‘It takes a pack to raise a child.’ In this case, a pack, Lord Akeldama, and all his drones may just possibly be sufficient to handle my daughter.

(Carriger 2012, 110)

Evidently motherhood, from a gendered perspective, and parenthood, from a broader perspective, is figured in these novels as hard work, and reliant on an expansive and non-normative family (i.e. not a nuclear family and not a pack) to succeed. And even then, suggests Alexia, they might not yet be able to manage Prudence.

This mutual responsibility for Prudence’s upbringing is visible in the vocabulary the child uses. Alexia and Conall remain consistently ‘Mama’ and ‘Dada’, but Prudence refers to her adoptive parent, Lord Akeldama, as ‘Dama’ an amalgamation of the two gendered names (Carriger 2012, 64). Conall, being ‘large and slightly unkempt’ with ‘massive shoulders’, as well as being an occasionally aggressive, protective alpha werewolf, is stereotypically masculine (Carriger 2011, 5, 2009, 13). As the most normatively gendered of Prudence’s three parents, Conall is ‘exhausted as only a man can be when put in sole charge of an infant’ (Carriger 2012, 98). Again, this recognises parenthood to be strenuous, but there is a certain gendered implication that it is more exhausting to Conall as a man than it is to Alexia as a woman: he is exhausted ‘as only a *man* can be’. But this gendered implication of capability at parenting does not apply to Lord Akeldama, who has ‘the lion’s share of [Prudence’s] care’ and, although he has difficulties with his daughter’s metanatural abilities, he seems both to enjoy and to be able to manage the demands of full-time parenting (Carriger 2012, 9). As ‘Dama’ in Prudence’s life, he is not normatively gendered, instead occupying a resistant middle ground.

The introduction of this new word ‘Dama’ is relevant to the problems of vocabulary in queer kinship. Elizabeth Freeman writes of normative kinship:

a child may not cross from one gendered position in the symbolic order to another: from nephew to aunt, from daughter to father ... By contrast, in queer life, such gendered and even generational crossings, at least, are eminently possible: consider the male-to-female transsexual who has been a nephew but becomes a niece and then an aunt.

(Freeman 2007, 310)

The generational and descent implications of this statement will be discussed later, but these questions of queer vocabularies interact interestingly with the *Parasol Protectorate*; Prudence’s ‘aunt Biffy and her uncle Lyall were more likely to scoop her up and twirl her around when the sun was up’ (Carriger 2012, 95). Prudence’s ‘aunt Biffy’ and ‘uncle Lyall’ are both male

werewolves, not biologically related to Prudence in any traditional, and in Lyall's case not even in any supernatural, sense. Although they are all members of Conall and Alexia's pack, Biffy and Lyall are not siblings of Prudence's three parents as a normative definition of an 'aunt' and an 'uncle' would suggest. 'Aunt' has been disjointed from its usual implications, and instead now coheres, in an ungendered way, with the roles that these characters fulfil.

In Freeman's analysis, the gendered implications of familial terminology remain the same, cohering with the performed gender of the person to whom they are applied: if a person is performatively a woman, she can be an aunt. In the *Parasol Protectorate* the very concept that these terms are gendered is destabilised; Biffy's biological sex is male, he is referred to with masculine pronouns, and he dresses as a man (albeit a man with a professional interest in women's clothing and accessories – though he would not wear them himself), yet he is able to fulfil a range of traditionally differently gendered, and ungendered, roles – son, lover, friend, and aunt. He also does not progress *from* one to the other, as in Freeman's view, but is many differently gendered things simultaneously.

### **Generationality and the supernatural**

Freeman further discusses queer familial vocabulary:

When we imagine extension over time, ... names are more readily available: lesbians and gays can certainly have children or adoptees. But the terms for descent tend to draw not only upon the dominant lexicon of kinship but also upon kinship's most conservative meanings and functions ... even the colloquial terms for non-dominant forms of descent such as mentorship seem to preclude the extension of new kinship terms. A mentee's mentee is not a grandmentee, the way a child's child is a grandchild. To put all this more simply, queer 'extended family' tends to collapse into amorphous and generic 'community', while queer 'descent groups' seem for the most part linguistically inconceivable.

(Freeman 2007, 297)

This relates to my discussion of Halberstam's work above: 'the authenticating notion of longevity renders all other relations meaningless and superficial and family ties, by virtue of being early bonds, seem more important than friendships' (Halberstam 2007, 317). Longevity is related to Freeman's discussion of descent, since both consider the risks and possibilities of queer temporality. Halberstam relates this discussion of longevity to the work of Kath Weston, who:

notes the way that kinship discourses invest in normative temporalities which privilege longevity over temporariness, permanence over

contingency, and so on. These normative conceptions of time and relation make permanent (even if estranged) connections take precedence over random (even if intense) associations.

(Halberstam 2007, 316–317)

While Freeman draws attention to the embedded ways in which vocabulary makes queer descent outside of conservative and normative lines impossible to imagine, Halberstam suggests that the very notion of queer longevity is invested in familial normativity.

Freeman articulates the possibilities of this term ‘belonging’, exploring how even it, often mobilised in ‘queer belonging’ as an alternative to family or more broad spectrum ‘community’, is in fact suggestively linked to the idea of ‘being long’. Freeman suggests that ‘to want to belong, let us say, is to long to be bigger, not only spatially, but also temporally, to “hold out” a hand across time and touch the dead, or those not born yet, to offer oneself beyond one’s own time’ (2007, 299). Freeman is apparently different to Halberstam in suggesting that longevity might offer *possibilities* for varied queer relationships, but both theorists use the terms of brief connection to suggest ways in which queer kinship might exceed structures of normativity. Freeman’s emphasis that relationships will ‘invariably end’ and on the reaching out to transiently ‘touch the dead’ could link productively to Halberstam’s ‘random (even if intense) associations’ (Freeman 2007, 299). There are evident differences in the two theorists’ arguments, though, with Halberstam favouring the rejection of longevity as a whole and Freeman suggesting the possibility of transforming, and queering, the concept of being long.

The *Parasol Protectorate* series proposes a very different relationship to longevity, and one which ambivalently interacts with Freeman’s and Halberstam’s arguments. Because the supernatural creatures that formulate this family are mostly immortal, age is different in the novels. The problematics of longevity reach new levels when family members can live well into their third or fourth century (Lord Akeldama could in fact be older; it is considered far too indelicate to ask). Given this, it is unsurprising, though not unproblematic, that characters prioritise the permanent connections that they share – be those biological connections between apparently disconnected individuals, emotional connections between friends or lovers, or legal connections of adoption/marriage, etc.

Some variability is found in the occasionally unreliable permanence of characters’ legal commitments. So, for example:

Lord Akeldama had nothing but time; he could afford a few decades to play at parenting. He had, after all, never indulged in such an experience before. When one was a vampire as long-lived as he, new experiences were hard-won, difficult to find, and treasured – like good-quality face powder.

(Carriger 2012, 81)

It seems that he does not view his legal adoption of Prudence a permanent change in his life and family, as he is 'play[ing] at parenting' and the fact that he only plans to give his daughter 'a few decades'. But the emphasis on Lord Akeldama's long life, and the fact that he 'treasure[s]' this experience, as well as his evident devotion to his beloved daughter throughout the novel, are evidence to the contrary; in truth, he is deeply and permanently committed to her. This is suggestive of a normatively perceived version of family, one in which long-term relationships are valued more highly than transient ones – problematic in the context of Halberstam's view of queer kinship.

However, Freeman's argument that vocabulary is integral to the most normatively conservative aspects of kinship, becomes relevant when Conall's great-great-great-granddaughter meets his new daughter, Prudence:

Lady Kingair, momentarily forgotten, was intrigued. 'This must be my new great-great-great-great-aunt?'

Alexia's forehead creased. 'Is that correct? Shouldn't it be great-great-great-great-half-sister?' She looked at her husband for support. 'Immortality makes for some pretty peculiar genealogy, I must say.'

(Carriger 2012, 26)

The problem here, of course, is that Lady Kingair and Alexia are attempting to apply normative structures and language to a family that, due to its supernatural members, entirely exceeds normative genealogy. The terminology becomes too obscure to illuminate anything about Prudence and Lady Kingair's relationship; there are too many 'greats' for the generational connections to be clear. Adequate vocabulary does not exist to express such familial relationships. And, even beyond this, Prudence's being a toddler and simultaneously a great-great-great-great-aunt to a woman who appears to be in her forties is indicative that normative descent patterns simply do not apply in this supernatural family.

Thus the 'dominant lexicon' from Freeman's analysis of kinship's 'most conservative meanings and functions' is shown to be as inadequate for describing the *Parasol Protectorate* family as it is for describing queer kinships; both exceed the matrices of normative relationality. Indeed, the characters in the novel often explicitly resist this dominant lexicon and its meanings and functions. Lady Kingair's references to Alexia and Conall as 'Grams' and 'Gramps' elide several generations of 'greats' and mock the absurdity of their incongruous ages, or apparent ages: 'Considering [Lady Kingair] looked older than both, it was an odd kind of greeting to anyone unfamiliar with the Maccons' familial relationships' (Carriger 2012, 25). Further, the continual attempts by characters to find a lexicon that exceeds conservative normativity suggests that this familial group does not 'collapse into amorphous and generic "community"'. Evidently the non-normative (if not quite queer) descent group may be 'linguistically inconceivable', but it is not *practically* inconceivable – in the world of these novels it exists, even while there is not

the vocabulary to describe it. The overreliance on permanence in the family does not mean that they are restricted to normativity; members of this family can, much more literally than in Freeman's original conception, "‘hold out’ a hand across time and touch the dead, or those not born yet'. By their very nature, they 'offer [themselves] beyond [their] own time', just not with a linear approach, nor a commitment to 'straight time' (Rohy 2009, xiv).

The implications of this word 'linear', and Valerie Rohy's useful expression of the risks of 'straight time' (similar in some ways to Halberstam's view of 'reproductive time' [Halberstam 2005, 5]) can also help to illuminate the problematics and power of generationality in the *Parasol Protectorate*. Rohy argues that queer histories are inevitably limited by the assumption that queer pasts will travel in direct lines. Instead she proposes an active reading of queer pasts in a range of directions, not dissimilar to Freeman's image of the queer hand that reaches forward and backward in time simultaneously. Rohy argues that 'Straight time is not simply heterosexual time, but it has, in tandem with the cult of reproductive futurism, served systematically to devalue queer subjects' (Rohy 2009, xiv). This 'reproductive futurism', deriving from the work of Lee Edelman (2004), emphasises the application of value to those relationships, i.e. heterosexual relationships, that can biologically reproduce and thus that have a 'future' in a biological and linear sense. In this way, straight time links directly to Halberstam and Freeman's concerns about investments in longevity and permanence.

Rohy also emphasises the possibilities offered by literature for evading 'straight time': 'every child knows that the clock runs steadily in one direction. In literature, however, the artificial temporality of narrative form alerts us to the fictional dimension of chronology' (Rohy 2009, xiv). It is here that the *Parasol Protectorate's* evidently fictional supernatural characters and their fictionally linear chronologies can be useful to a resistance of normativity. While it is not possible for real queer subjects to be immortal and thus to transcend temporal limitations, the characters of the *Parasol Protectorate* draw attention to the deeply flawed nature of prioritising linear generationality in familial relationships.

An aversion to 'straight time' and linearity in the series is frequently in evidence, not just in problems of vocabulary but also in the complex ways in which characters' relationships resist normative generational 'straight' lines. A sexual relationship develops between 'aunt Biffy' and 'uncle Lyall'. Within normatively linear structures of family, this would generationally be most confusing. Lyall is much older, and is in some ways in a parental, avuncular, or even grandparental, position in the pack in relation to Biffy. They are also fraternally connected, and, at one point when Biffy is struggling with newly being turned into a werewolf, Lyall treats him in 'a motherly fashion' (Carriger 2010a, 226). Biffy and Lyall's relationship, then, might be characterised as mother and son/daughter, stepgrandparent and stepgrandchild, uncle and nephew/niece, and siblings, all simultaneously. Again, existing vocabulary is inadequate to describe these relationships, since the majority of these terms

are problematically gendered in a way that is not applicable to the *Parasol Protectorate*. And Biffy and Lyall become lovers, which defies the assumed logic of *all* of these kinship relations. Evidently, a normative linear and biological understanding of family is fundamentally resisted, and Lyall and Biffy's relationship is just one example of this. There is also the generational difference between Alexia and Conall (he is several centuries older than her), Alexia's maternal attitude to her friend/son/sibling Biffy (Carriger 2011, 53), Lyall's paternal care and chastisement of his father/brother Conall (Carriger 2010a, 21). The examples continue, but so do the inadequacies of vocabulary to express the complexity and lack of normativity in these characters' relationships to one another.

### **Conclusion: our vampires, our werewolves, ourselves**

In her seminal 1995 text *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Nina Auerbach wrote of an important, post-1980s and pre-millennial moment in vampire literature:

In its day, *Dracula* was a compendium of emergent phobias. Twentieth-century America made it a bible of erotic, and then political, liberation. At the elegiac close of the American century it turned into a cry of mourning and warning.

(Auerbach 1995, 175–176)

Elegiac itself, Auerbach's analysis draws attention to the mobilisation of vampires in literature in the 1980s as an analogy for the 'polluted blood' of the AIDS crisis, drawing on the long history that associates vampires with resistant and non-normative sexualities (Auerbach 1995, 175). In the twenty-first century, there has been a vast increase in the popularity of vampire and supernatural literature in the UK and US, most notable with Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008) franchise (but also in immensely popular television shows such as *Vampire Diaries*, *Dracula*, and *True Blood*). However, it is interesting to note in relation to Auerbach's discussion that many vampire texts in the twenty-first century have moved away from resisting normativity – the erotic and political liberation referred to here – and instead progressed toward the reassertion of heterosexual and familial normativity.<sup>3</sup> This is, of course, one of the many discourses against which the *Parasol Protectorate* and other contemporary steampunk fantasies are, and can be, importantly resistant.

There are two trends in steampunk fantasy's representations of non-normative families. The first is seen, for example, in Mark Hodder's *Burton and Swinburne* series (2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015) and it stretches back to Gibson and Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (1990). These novels visibly re-entrench gender and familial stereotypes, not least with their representation of family-less bachelors (Gibson and Sterling's Edward Mallory does have brothers and sisters, but his connections with them seem academic,

rather than emotional). Hodder's Burton sees family is a hindrance. His housekeeper, Mrs Angel, is an entirely unironic stereotype of the *angel* in the house: she is a female maternal figure who does his housework, laundry, cooking, and generally enables him to maintain his bachelor and adventurer lifestyle. In other words, steampunk texts such as Hodder's insist upon the value of conservative gender norms both within the family and beyond.

These novels are much less common, however, than those which are more optimistic: steampunk fantasy novels which propose alternative gender roles, sexualities, families, and belongings, albeit in ways that are often problematic – like Carriger's. Novels such as Shelley Adina's *Magnificent Devices* series (2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, 2016) and Kady Cross's *Steampunk Chronicles* (2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2014) represent families with varying degrees of resistance and capitulation to conservative normativity. Cross's series, for example, presents a group of young friends, who come to understand themselves as family. Similar to Carriger's characters, they problematically rely on wealth and social standing in order to non-normatively cohabit and to resist biological versions of 'family'. Adina's *Magnificent Devices* series evades some of these class and wealth implications, when aristocratic but destitute, Lady Claire Trevelyan adopts a collection of impoverished children as her 'flock mates' and family, and commits to their care and upbringing as a maternal guide. However, both series remain heterosexually focused, with Adina's Claire and Cross's Finlay both positioned in classic heterosexual and homosocial love triangles – two men vying for their affections. Both series certainly suggest the broader affective connections of familial care and alternative definitions of 'family', but neither have quite the scale, the range of relationships, nor the queer implications, of Carriger's texts.

It is also worth noting, of course, that these other steampunk series do not contain the same supernatural fantasy elements of Carriger's. Carriger takes the possibilities of her vampire and werewolves, as well as the freedom offered by her steampunk nineteenth century, and creates a family of complex and often deeply problematic relationships. The apparent necessity of wealth for the maintenance such a large-scale family appears to tie in with characters' persistent distaste for the 'lower orders', including the 'poor unfortunates of the middle class' (Carriger 2011, 33). This inevitably suggests that characters in these novels are not resistant to conservative social politics in *general*. Similarly, problematic representations of race and the apparent commitment to the concept of empire are often proudly touted in most of the series; there are displays of orientalism at times, not least during the family's visit to Egypt (Carriger 2012). Evidently, anti-conservative, resistant politics are not unproblematically narrated throughout the series.

However, where the novels do posit resistance to a contemporary conservative politics, is in their resistance to the nuclear family. As the Tarabotti-Maccon-Akeldama-*et al.* (again, adequate vocabulary is unavailable) family expands over the course of the series, Carriger uses the longevity of the



supernatural characters – and the short lives of the human and preternatural characters – to explore the possibilities for changing generational relationships from the straight and linear to the twisting and multiple. Characters' relationships do not necessarily rely upon conventional biological or legal links, but can instead have multiple forms of relationality simultaneously, sometimes biological, sometimes sexual, sometimes legal, sometimes none, some, or all of the above. Without fundamentally rejecting the nuclear family (many families can be observed living happily normatively), nor fundamentally endorsing the non-normative family (it certainly has its problems), Carriger's use of the supernatural offers a productive suggestion for fictional, and fantastical, resistance to normative familial structures. Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* suggests that not only does it take a pack to raise a child, but that a variably constructed and non-normative pack might offer even more.

## Notes

- 1 The love plot is somewhat shifted to the left in the fact that it resists more typical gendered pursuit narratives, with werewolf protocol insisting on 'the *female's* choice', i.e. that Alexia must pursue her male partner, rather than the more conventional structure of historical romance novels in which the female must be pursued (Carriger 2009, 176).
- 2 It is worth noting that many of the human and supernatural marriages in the series might be seen as '*deployment[s] of alliance*' as much as forms of social and sexual control. Felicity's pursuit of a husband, for example, evidently has little to do with the pursuit of sexual normativity, and much more a pursuit of social status.
- 3 A quick glance at the *Twilight* novels, for example (or indeed the posters for several of the movies), immediately reveals a family comprised of four, and later five, heterosexual vampire couples, who exist in clearly defined parent/child organisation; one couple presents matriarch and patriarch (with no recognition of the unusual age gaps here) and the others all present biological or adopted children (i.e. turned into vampires by the patriarch or adopted into the family some time after transformation). The plots are focused on heterosexual desire throughout, and later on the pro-life preservation of a foetus, despite dangerous risks to the health of the biological mother (Meyer 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008). Critics have sought to read these families as non-normative (Platt 2010), but it seems evident that vampire literature in the twenty-first century participates in the much broader cultural and political trend in promoting the conservative nuclear family.

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## 4 Strange boys, queer boys

### Gay representations in young adult fantastic fiction

*Andrew M. Butler*

There is a moment in David Levithan's novel *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) when the narrator Paul finds himself confronted by his straight ex-boyfriend Kyle in a video rental store: 'I'm caught in Comedy. Only Science Fiction stands between us. It's a big section, but not big enough' ([2003] 2005, 94). Kyle is in Foreign Language. The foregrounding of labels and genres is striking and these categories have rather more certainty than virtually any others in this chapter, which aims to discuss the representation of gay protagonists in *Dance on My Grave* (Chambers 1982 [2005]), *Ender's Game* (Card [1985] 1988), *Strange Boy* (Magrs 2002) and *Boy Meets Boy* Levithan ([2003] 2005). This sample is small because there has been almost no gay-themed Young Adult fantastic fiction. As the Young Adult category emerged in the late 1960s, Aidan Chambers observed that 'Any attempt to write about adolescent homosexual themes directly would be quite out of the question in the present climate' (1969, 73). In 1998, Christine Jenkins counted about a hundred LGBTQ titles since the publication of John Donovan's *I'll Get There: It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969) (1998, 299) and Corrine M. Wickens calculated that there had been over two hundred by 2011 (2011, 149). Most have been realist, bildungsromans about growing up gay.

#### The fantastic

I intend to use the term 'fantastic' loosely to categorise a range of non-realist genres such as utopia, science fiction and fantasy. The fantastic may primarily be associated with writers such as J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Terry Pratchett, but Tzvetan Todorov uses the label to categorise texts whose truth statuses are unclear, where the reader hesitates between supernatural and natural explanations of events. In the Todorovian fantastic, the reader is not clear whether there are such things as rings of invisibility, wardrobes to other realms or flat planets balanced on the back of elephants stood on a turtle or whether someone is dreaming, hallucinating or being hoodwinked. I would extend this category to fiction where the reader is not clear as to the truth status of what is being read within the framework of the text, where the narrative is not entirely reliable.

Aidan Chambers's *Dance on My Grave* is 16-year-old Hal Robinson's account of his seven-week, intense friendship with 18-year-old Barry Gorman,

a relationship that is clearly sexual, interspersed with the reports of the social worker, Judith Atkins. These documents are framed between two press cuttings: one about a boy (Hal) desecrating a grave (Barry's), the other about the Supervision Order placed on Hal. Hal's account has to be taken on trust, but is written within the context of his facing a fine or a custodial sentence. The novel also describes what was then an illegal relationship, as both boys were below the legal age of consent for homosexuality. When Chambers started the novel in 1966, inspired by a news item in the *Guardian* about a boy desecrating a grave (Greenway 2006, 31), male homosexuality was illegal. The different discourses describe Hal from several angles – from the journalistic, the sociological and the autobiographical. The first writes out the homosexuality: Hal and Barry have had 'an argument over a girl' (Chambers [1982] 2005, 253), which is a convenient motive but at best a half-truth. Atkins, who has read the account that was written for her, passes no comment on the sexuality of her client, seeking rather explanations within depression. Hal writes of his sexual encounters, albeit codedly, but does not label himself. All are in the past tense, written after Barry's death, but there is clearly a distinction between Hal's self-description as pale and Atkins's tanned Hal. It is through discourse – that can be written and rewritten, drafted and redrafted, edited even – that Hal fantasises himself into (fictional) existence. It is through the testimony that he declares himself. Chambers suggests that 'It is storying that changes us, not events ... Hal writes himself into an understanding of his experience with Barry Gorman' (1995, 112). One of Hal's favourite writers is Kurt Vonnegut, who writes in the introduction to one of his novels: 'We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful what we pretend to be' ([1961] 1992, vii). Whilst the novel is clearly not fantastic in the sense of including impossible events, the reader may hesitate over its truth values. Hal performs his gendered, sexual and social identity.

### **The utopian**

The fantastic includes fiction about utopia, a category 'utopia' hinged on an ambiguity of its Greek root of *ou* meaning 'no' and *eu* meaning 'good'. Utopia is both a good place and no-place. It can be a wish-fulfilment, showing the possibility that the real world could be different. As Fredric Jameson argues: 'The Utopian idea ... keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one and takes the form of a stubborn negation of all that is' (1971, 111). But, as Amy S. Pattee argues that *Boy Meets Boy* is an example of both utopian and romantic fiction:

*Boy Meets Boy* is a utopian novel: it functions effectively as a romance novel, a genre critics have called utopian, and also draws upon and extends conventions of homosexual representation found in 'traditional' gay-themed young adult literature and gay pornography to depict a distinctly utopian world of sexual liberation.

(2008, 156)

The romance has historically privileged heterosexual union, representing it as a utopian goal of an individual self being complemented and completed by another. In this novel, the narrator Paul falls in love with a new boy in school, Noah, but misunderstandings delay their establishing a relationship. No one has any problem with Paul's gayness or anyone else's sexuality in this town: 'There isn't really a gay scene or a straight scene in our town. They got all mixed up a while back, which I think is for the best' (Levithan [2003] 2005, 9). The demands of narrative are such that the union with Noah is delayed, he has already split up from the straight and confused Kyle and he falls out with his best female friend Joni over her boyfriend. Sexuality itself is not the problem.

Homosexual narratives often end with funerals rather than weddings, with one or other of the lovers dying – *Dance on My Grave* being no exception – and seem more dystopian than utopian. Whilst Levithan's utopia is useful as a blueprint, it is not a roadmap. Levithan gives no indication of how they got there from 'here'. Homosexuality has been decriminalised across the Western world and civil unions and same-sex marriages have been legislated for, but it still remains a point of contention, especially in relation to minors. Kimberley Reynolds suggests that Levithan 'offers a vision of an alternative world brought about not by new technologies or some form of Armageddon, but by adjusting the way we think' (2007, 128). Homophobia or tolerance is a matter of ideological shifts – but the social structure also adjusts to accommodate those shifts.

Paul Magrs's *Strange Boy* (2002), like his earlier Phoenix Court trilogy, is set in Newton Aycliffe, a new town in the northeast of England near Darlington. As Joanne Woodman points out, the British economist

[William] Beveridge imagined a town where class barriers would be overcome and the inhabitants, alongside the labor government, would create an idealistic place without poverty, unemployment or squalor. Almost 50 years later Magrs depicts a different Newton Aycliffe where Beveridge's vision of socialist ideals and equality has been undermined by Thatcherism, reflected in low wages and unemployment.

(2010, 299)

In the Phoenix Court trilogy, *Marked for Life* (1996), *Does it Show?* (1997) and *Could it be Magic?* (1999), 'everybody is "queer" in some way' (Woodman 2010, 303). Magrs describes it as "'Queer" with a big Q, because it's not just about homosexuality, it's about variousness' (Jamieson 1997). *Strange Boy*, Magrs's first book for Young Adults, is a first-person account of a few months in the life of 10-year-old David, who lives with his mother and his younger brother Chris. The two children spend some weekends with their father and grandmother as both parents attempt to build new relationships. David begins a sexual relationship with 14-year-old John, although he has yet to gain the vocabulary to categorise his sexuality. David believes that he has superpowers, which might lead the reader to a Todorovian hesitation as to whether he is deluded or genuine.

### **Fantasies: diagnosing homosexuality**

The sexual desires that are at the heart of these Young Adult fantastic novels nod toward the senses of 'fantasy' (and 'phantasy') within psychoanalytic discourse, relating to sexual desire or perceptions of the world. Despite – or perhaps because of – the association of fantasy with non-adult readerships, it seems particularly well suited to the exploration of fantasies. As Rosemary Jackson argues 'The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made "absent"' (1981, 4). The fantastic both allows fantasies to be approached indirectly and allows the reimagining of a world where these desires may be expressed.

Same-sex desires are one set of desires that have historically been silenced – homosexuality is the love that dare not speak its name. The teenaged years, on either side of puberty, are ones in which the subject establishes their identity, and that might be thought to include an awareness of their sexual identity, for some a homosexual identity. There may be a temporary phase of a boy or girl desiring their own sex, followed by the adoption of or recognition of a heterosexual identity. The individual may decide or discover that they are attracted to both sexes, identifying as bisexual. It even be that the individual rejects the heteronormative binary systems of sex, gender and sexuality and identifies as genderqueer. The Young Adult novel, as a forum in which to explore teen issues, inevitably focuses on sex, parents, authority, work and the self. In the late 1960s, Chambers notes its areas of interest include illegitimacy, criminal actions, drugs, ill-health, death, shyness, war, the vote, drink, smoking, swearing, colour and race. Such topics are, inevitably, controversial – writers such as S.E. Hinton, Judy Blume and Robert Cormier are often having their books banned from school libraries.

Michel Foucault controversially argues that individual identity was not defined by the sex of the sexual partner until the last third of the nineteenth century, when medical and scientific discourse 'homosexuality', 'heterosexuality' and a number of other sexualities were constructed as diagnoses of identity (1998, 43). Sodomy had been forbidden in English and Welsh law in 1533 – in legislation that became absorbed into the legal framework of individual states in the United States – but this was superseded in Britain by the criminalisation of 'gross indecency' between men in the Labouchère Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885). The recognition of homosexuality thus becomes both a medical diagnosis and a criminal allegation. D.A. Miller, for example, asks how the audiences of the film *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948) know that the two main characters are gay: 'the homosexuality of the protagonists, [is] never either visually displayed (with a kiss) or verbally disclosed (by a declaration), is not there in the story at all' (Miller 1991, 122). The audience might know that play that Hitchcock filmed was inspired by the murderous lovers Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, but where is the homosexuality *in* the film? It might be located in the sense that the two stand *rather too closely together* or share a phone *in the bedroom* – in other words, on the level of innuendo.



Chris West argues that homosexuality is frequently read at the level of connotation, at the level of Barthesian myth (2007), although that might be thought to be a form of paranoid reading which echoes the witch hunts of McCarthyism or the interpretations of innuendos in Oscar Wilde's work at his trial. Being homosexual might be defined by (sexual) actions, by appearance, by lifestyle or by community – or by a readerly identification imposed on a text or recognised as being represented in the text. At what point is the representation of a character a representation of a gay character?

The words 'gay' or 'homosexual', for example, do not appear in Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, a novel originally published for adult readers that has since has appeared under teen imprints (Atom in 2002, Tor Teen in 2013) and was filmed by Gavin Hood in 2013. In the future, humanity has met and been attacked by an insectoid alien species, the Formics, generally referred to as Buggers. Child soldiers are trained, using video games and simulations, to wage war on the aliens and Andrew 'Ender' Wiggins proves to be the most successful strategist, destined to be the saviour of humanity. James Campbell notes that the term 'bugger' is 'slang for either a male homosexual or the practice of sodomy' (2009, 490), and that the school at which Ender trains is a homosocial space, suffused with sexual imagery. Kate Bonin identifies the connotations and suggests that 'One might easily indulge in a wink-wink/nudge-nudge reading of *Ender's Game* in quest of hidden gay subtext: Ender must save all mankind from the hideous buggers, who are ruled by giant, scary queens' (2002, 18). Ender is both the object of a crush – from Bean, a highly intelligent child – and seems threatened by the one he develops for Bonzo Madrid, his first commanding officer: 'tall and slender, with beautiful black eyes and slender hips that hinted at refinement. I would follow such beauty anywhere, said something inside Ender' (Card [1985] 1998, 76). The two clash for dominance, culminating in a naked fight in the showers, during which Ender kills Bonzo with a kick to the groin.

Whilst the novel positions this as demonstrating the sort of ruthlessness a saviour needs, it might also be a moment of homosexual panic. In closed single-sex environments – schools, prisons, ships and the armed forces – males may find themselves in closer proximity than they are comfortable with. Freud describes a kind of homosexual, '*contingent* inverts[, who] ... under certain external conditions – of which inaccessibility of any normal sexual object and imitation are the chief – ... are capable of taking as their sexual object someone of their own sex and of deriving satisfaction from sexual intercourse with him' (1953, 137). Homosociality normally stops short of actual sexual encounters, but sexual actions may be a violent assertion of one man's power over another. It may also lead to a violent expression of disgust – whether the violent individual is disavowing his own desires or rejecting the sexual advances, real or perceived, of another man. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has analysed in detail a number of fictional cases where homosexual desires (actual or perceived) have elicited a violent reaction (1985, 1990), whether in disgust or disavowal; homosexual panic has been used in the real world as a successful

defence against a murder charge. Ender may have been overcome by feelings he cannot accept.

Campbell suggests that the novel's ending complicates the potential homophobic reading with Ender's guilt over his killing of the Buggers. He argues the novel 'offers the scapegoating of the outcast as the easiest way to community, but it ultimately rejects such tactics in favor of a more subtle conception that stresses the dependence of the community on what it excludes' (Campbell 2009, 500). Nicolas Michaud and Jessica Watkins also discuss the various instances of homosociality and male bonding within the novel, and its lack of developed female characters. They suggest that the novel is not as 'much homophobic as ... sexist ... expressing the yearning and suffering of a deep unrequited love between men, which can never really be eased by the inferior love of women' (2013, 94). These are relationships that, problematically, pass the love of women. These readings need to be made in the context of Card's own stance against homosexuality (Campbell 2009; Kessel 2004).

### ***Dance on My Grave: diagnosing Hal***

In *Dance on My Grave*, Hal is at a turning point in his life—deciding whether to go onto A levels or to get a job. As he considers his future, he meets Barry Gorman, falls in love and is offered the chance to work in the Southend-on-Sea record shop owned by Barry's late father. The two make a pact—when one of them dies, the survivor will dance on their grave. Although the words 'homosexual' and 'gay' do not appear at any point in the novel, Hal gives us a few clues to his sexuality early on. The descriptions of the visitors to his hometown shifting from trippers to strippers would heteronormatively assumed to be female, but it is when Hal recalls Spike, whose boat *Tumble* he is to steal, that this shifts: 'Girls take one look at him and tremble at the sight. In the right mood I tremble a bit myself. On Spike a crummy shirt and well-worn jeans only serve to emphasize his sexiness' (Chambers [1982] 2005, 11). As Hal sails—'cruises'—off the coast, he becomes aware of a 'tumescent' black cloud—the landscape and the activity becoming sexualised. Here he capsizes in the Thames.

Rescued by Barry, he is taken home to the latter's house and washed and dressed in Barry's clothes. Hal performs new identities through his costumes—Barry later buys Hal a motorcycle helmet and then a new set of clothes and Hal has to dress up in women's clothes to see Barry's corpse at the mortuary. Barry's bedroom includes a copy of one of David Hockney's 'California swimming pool paintings, "Pete getting out of Nick's pool". I knew it was Hockney because I liked his work too' (Chambers [1982] 2005, 37). This is a painting of a naked young man shown from behind, clearly sexualised, at the edge of a swimming pool, by an openly gay painter. Later in the novel, Barry is able to quote W.H. Auden's 'Lay Your Sleeping Head My Love' (1940) and knows that "'Shakespeare dedicated his sonnets to Mr W.H., widely thought to have been his boyfriend'" (Chambers [1982] 2005, 158). Whilst these are hardly obscure references, they connote homosexual identities.

Lest we think that this is a man seducing a boy – starting a relationship that would only become legal in 2003, when the homosexual and heterosexual ages of consent were equalised at 16 – Hal reveals that he had decided to be rescued by Barry. He has been seeking for a best friend, a perfect bosom buddy, and Barry fits the bill:

I never make a pass at passing attraction, whatever the sex. But when Barry appears alongside ... I take one look and I know that he is the latest contender ... I am sitting on a wrecked dinghy thinking of acquiring a Jonathan for my David, and wondering how long you need to find out exactly what it is that passes the love of women.

(Chambers [1982] 2005, 54)

Hal acts the role of victim in order to establish Barry as the saviour, as he is a few pages later with a drunk (‘“Sir Galahad to the rescue again, ducky”’; Chambers [1982] 2005, 87)). With this seductive intention in mind, it feels almost as if Barry is the tumescent black cloud. This is not the first time that Hal has had a same-sex encounter, having had what appears to be a physical relationship with Harvey when both were 9, a less physical one with a 14-year-old scientist Neill and engaged in mutual masturbation with Buster, again two years older than him:

Buster proved himself undesirable because being hugged by him was like being hugged by a teenaged cactus with large biceps. I have avoided rugger players ever since. ‘I wish you were a girl’ breathed Buster at the climactic moment. As I did not wish Buster a girl, only less cactal and overpowering, an essential difference between his ideas about himself and mine about myself became all clear to my astonished mind.

(Chambers [1982] 2005, 51)

These relationships seem more than just teenage experimentation, but Hal is both desirous of a mutual friendship and of something that is exclusive. He is jealous of the drunk, to whom Barry returns after they have left him at the pier (something happens between the two, but it is not clear what), and of the Norwegian au pair Kari (with whom it is not clear that anything has happened).

Hal interest in bosom friends is further provoked when learns about the future King David and his relationship with the son of King Saul; he becomes obsessed with a section of the First Book of Samuel:

When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father’s house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and

gave it to David, and his armour, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.

(1 Samuel 18:1–4)

When Jonathan was killed at Mount Gilboa, David laments his end: ‘I am distressed for you my brother Jonathan; Greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women’ (2 Samuel 1:23, 26–27). Hal is frustrated by the Bible’s lack of detail, wanting to know ‘what exactly had happened to make David think like that. For God’s sake, what had they done to – with? – each other?’ (Chambers [1982] 2005, 52). It may indeed be a Platonic friendship, which is the traditional Christian interpretation.

Hal is circumspect as the Bible in describing what Barry had done to/with him – in part an act of self-censorship on Chambers’s part for a Young Adult novel. As Roberta Trites argues, ‘in keeping with the unwritten publishing codes that dominate the production of Young Adult literature, the adolescents’ genital sex acts are alluded to only interstitially’ (2000, 106). Betty Greenway suggests that the euphemism is all part of Hal’s play with words and thus his self-fashioning: ‘Hal talks in riddles, sometimes cagey, often in comic ones’ (2006, 38). Hal is addressing the social worker and himself, sharing and hiding his secret side. Describing their first sexual encounter, Hal uses Cockney rhyming slang:

‘Like a plate of ham?’ Barry said one night.

‘Thought you was a ten-to-two, squire.’

‘Don’t mess about.’

I hadn’t a clue what he meant, so ‘Help yourself,’ I said, and he gave me a present from Southend of a kind I hadn’t had before.

(Chambers [1982] 2005, 157)

Hal knows to respond in slang (‘ten-to-two’ is an indication that Gorman is Jewish), even if he does not know this term for oral sex. He appropriates the phrase at the end of the novel, having taken Spike to the cinema: ‘that night I gave him a present from Southend’ (Chambers [1982] 2005, 251). It is to be hoped that Hal has learned from his experience with Barry – not to be possessive, not to want all of Spike for himself – but it is clear that by then that Hal has come to know the self that he has become. It is the manner of his relationship with Barry that was the problem, not that it was homosexual in nature.

### ***Strange Boy: passing the love of women?***

The naming of the titular *Strange Boy*, David, along with John, must be an authorial nod to the Books of Samuel, a hint for the reader in the know that alongside all the loving women in David’s life that his desires will be elsewhere. His life is full of sweets, comic books, films and television programmes,

*Doctor Who*, and he views his life through a fantastical lens. He is convinced that he has superpowers, offering to pass these on to John, in the nearby woods. First they have to lie down naked, and then they have to touch each other's penis: "“You don't have to do anything with it. Just touch lightly at first, and hold on”" (Magrs 2002, 11). Magrs suggests 'that this is the sort of experimentation that most boys indulge in around the beginning of puberty, regardless of the sexual orientation they eventually settle into' (Johnstone 2002). Might this be a phase David is going through? Is this less strange than we might assume? Caught in the crossfire between his two parents, David uses his superpowers to help his mother's new boyfriend's mother win a supermarket trolley dash and forswears his powers to heal John after the older boy is the victim of an attack that is homophobic in nature. Is David queering the categories of sexuality – a contingent homosexual?

The thought of intimacy with John excites David, although he was uncomfortable with being naked alongside his policeman father's colleagues: 'And I am, here now, in the bedroom, playing with the *Star Wars* figures, thinking about the naked policemen and of lying on the dead leaves with John. This weird, hard pressure in my dick, just like John's, something that I don't know what to do with' (Magrs 2002, 134). He has already sexualised his figures, as Leia is trying to decide between them: 'A thought strikes me. Han Solo gives Luke Skywalker a brief but impassioned kiss' (Magrs 2002, 134). Such explicitness in a Young Adult novel was controversial, even though it was two years after the repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988), which prohibited the expenditure by local authorities for the purpose of promoting homosexuality. Tino Ferri from the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers said, 'Children have enough to deal with when they are growing up rather than confusing them even further with this kind of nonsense', and Christian Institute director Colin Hart said, 'This [book] is almost pornographic. We have to remember that it is possible for a 14-year-old boy to abuse a 10-year-old' (quoted in the *Scotsman*, 23 June 2002). Abuse is indeed possible, but equally children may have a sense of their sexual orientation even if they do not have the discourse through which to express it. Those who oppose Magrs' semiautobiographical tale on morals seem to believe that it would create gay children; it might help Young Adults discovering, exploring, coming to terms with or appreciating their sexuality.

### ***Boy Meets Boy: utopian heterotopia***

Whilst Ender, Hal and David have no label for their sexuality, Paul in *Boy Meets Boy* has been categorised since kindergarten: 'PAUL IS DEFINITELY GAY AND HAS A VERY GOOD SENSE OF SELF' (Levithan [2003] 2005, 17). How this is known is unclear – there have been suggestions that there are differences between heterosexual and male homosexual brains (LeVay 1991) or a gay gene (Hamer, Hu, Magnuson, Hu and Pattatucci 1993), but the mechanism is not spelled out. In Foucauldian terms, homosexuality emerges

as a medical-scientific diagnosis and becomes a legal accusation. When Paul recalls how he first bonded with Tony in the Strand bookstore over copies of David Leavitt's *The Lost Language of Cranes* (1986), although Paul asserts his superior experience by knowing *Equal Affections* (1989) and *A Place I've Never Been* (1990). Paul's diagnosis is, perhaps, a marker that this novel is not to be taken as a realist depiction of the world, but is in fact a work of science fiction or fantasy.

Tony is part of a religious family, who refuse to recognise his sexuality and are the major source of homophobic tension in the novel – the *bildungsroman*, rites of passage or coming-out narrative is thus sidelined to a supporting character. Individual self-realisation is less important than a location within a supportive community. As the novel's dedication makes clear, Tony was inspired by the eponymous subject of a 1998 song by Patty Griffin in which Tony is remembered as 'quiet' and a 'little overweight' with 'breasts like a girl'. Having looked in the mirror and seen that he was gay (the lyric uses the slur 'faggot'), Tony shoots himself dead. This is a tragic end for someone who cannot accept themselves for who they are, and the fate from which *Boy Meets Boy*'s Tony has to be rescued. Pattee argues that 'The novel's realistic characterization of Tony is a likely function of this character's situation outside of the primary utopian setting of the novel' (2008, 164), and he has to leave his space of home in order to live properly. Tony loves being part of that utopian community, "'But I can never really enjoy it, because I know that at the end, I'll be back here'" (Levithan [2003] 2005, 185), at home.

Pattee also categorises the novel's town as a heterotopia:

a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (Foucault 1986, 24)

This fits the quasi-realist yet isolated setting, which Paul describes as an island. Foucault suggests that heterotopias are locations separate from the rest of the world with a specific function, entry to which requires negotiation of some form, for example, old people's homes, asylums, prisons, cinemas, ships and cemeteries. Every town and city has a cemetery, sacred space, separate from the inhabitants and yet intimately connected to almost every one of them. Up to the nineteenth century, Foucault noted, these were at the heart of the community, a sacred space, but with increasing fears about pollution and diseases passed on from the cadavers they were relocated to the margins and the suburbs. As Foucault argues, 'the cemetery is indeed a highly heterotopic place since, for the individual, the cemetery begins with this strange heterochrony, the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance' (1986, 26). It is at the cemetery that Paul attempts a reconciliation with Noah that is



complicated by Kyle's arrival (and, of course, Hal twice dances on Barry's grave). Meanwhile, the high school is also a heterotopia, with its curricula, SATs, sports, cheerleaders, proms and other rituals, a distinct (educative) function and the child or the teen isolated as a deviant from the norms of society.

Sara McNamee has studied teenagers' establishment of heterotopic space. The home is policed by parental strictures and streets can be dangerous (transport, predatory adults, other children), with girls apparently more aware and able to negotiate those dangers because they are perceived to be at risk. Games and sports function as heterotopic spaces, whether on a court, a field or a computer screen; McNamee suggests that 'The bounded space of everyday life is transformed by some of the leisure activities ... into unbounded space which inverts the everyday life of the child' (2007, 490). Here the space also includes bookshops and the various locations of their dances and, of course, the cemetery – the heterotopia is also present in the Thames, beach, pier, amusement park, record store and cemetery of *Dance on My Grave*; the woods, shopping precinct, cinema and streets of *Strange Boy*; and, more problematically, the virtual spaces of *Ender's Game*.

### Secret identities: superheroing the queer

In *Strange Boy* and *Dance on My Grave*, David and Hal keep their queer identities secret; the former because he does not have the words to express it, the latter because he is caught up in what is an illegal relationship. Hal plays with language to both veil and unveil. Early in the novel, he reads the graffiti 'BRIAN LOVES JONATHAN', to which has been appended 'SO DID DAVID. READ YOUR BIBLE' and then 'BATMAN LOVES ROBIN' (Chambers [1982] 2005, 52, 53). The association of the DC Comics superhero Batman, his sidekick Robin and homosexuality recalls a moral panic from the 1950s: 'Only someone ignorant of the fundamentals of psychiatry and of the psychopathology of sex can fail to realize a subtle atmosphere of homoeroticism which pervades the nature of the mature "Batman" and his young friend "Robin"' (Wertham 1955, 190). There is an age gap between Hal and Barry, as well as David and John, just as there is between Robin and Batman.

There are distinct stages to becoming a superhero, although they are not necessarily narrated in order. They hail from ordinary backgrounds, but have been transformed into someone with extraordinary powers – being bitten by a radioactive spider, hit with gamma rays or coming to Earth from an alien planet – which they keep concealed most of the time, and they frequently wear a mask as they become saviours. Wickens notes how 'secrecy, silences, and coded language have long been associated with homosexuality and queer identities, particularly identified through phrases such as "the closet" and "being (or not being) out"' (2011, 159). Superheroes are often isolated from mainstream society, and establish a secret base or fortress to which they can



retreat. A number of superheroes – especially the Hulk, Spider-Man and other Marvel characters – seem ideally placed to be identificatory figures for teenagers, with a sense of underlying angst or torment.

It is the mask that gives the wearer strength, although Scott Bukatman puzzles over this when he asks ‘if Hal Jordan is the “secret identity” why does the Green Lantern wear the mask?’ (2003, 54). The gay identity is the hidden one, the one that dare not be spoken, that needs liberation, but it is the figure with superpowers that wears the mask. It would perhaps be misleading to suggest that the superhero identity is a performance or a masquerade – they do have powers or skills – and making these parallels might weigh in on one side of the debate about whether sexuality is a choice or innate. Barry transforms the boy, Henry, into Hal, reclothes him and gives him a motorcycle helmet, which Hal describes as a mask. Barry makes a Robin to his Batman. Bukatman suggests ‘the acquisition of costume, mask, and logo might constitute a “symbolic birth,” or “rebirth” into the symbolic, which ... transfers issues of birth and identity from the field of maternal power into the realm of the patriarchy’ (2003, 55). They have costumes and masks, but lack a logo – perhaps the gay identity they do not name. Barry is taking his late father’s place at the family record shop, although does not entirely escape patriarchy as his mother is somewhat overbearing. Hal seeks the approval of Barry as father figure and his biological father, although it is from his mother that he learns that his father’s brother cross-dresses (Chambers [1982] 2005, 223). Barry’s bedroom is his fortress of solitude, as well as perhaps the shop, and Hal’s earlier bosom friends have had bedroom laboratories or dens in the woods.

If Barry’s superhero status is symbolic, David’s in *Strange Boy* is (apparently) real. His own origin story is obscure, although he claims to remember his life from even before his birth. He claims to have super speed, to be able to control others and to heal. After John has been hurt in a fight, David lays glowing hands on him: ‘it’s plain that every scrap of bruise and cut has gone from his body’ (Magrs 2002, 228–229). John has just asserted that they should not be naked together, either for a fear of the superpowers or of homosexuality. They have ‘queer’ as a term of abuse, but not as a marker of pride (that was two decades later); they do not use the words ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’. For being repeatedly different, David is regarded as queer.

## Conclusion

Apart from *Ender’s Game*, the novels discussed in this chapter do not present homosexuality as a problem, although in two of them it seems to be a closeted identity without a label. Hal’s problem is his possessiveness rather than his same-sex desire and David’s stem from the breakup of his parents’ marriage and the fact that not everyone shares his fantasising. Both forge self-identities in isolation, within the heterotopias of Southend and Newton Aycliffe which have yet to reveal a wider gay community. In the quasi-sequel, *The Diary of a*

*Dr Who Addict*, the 13-year-old David has an increasingly strained friendship with fellow *Doctor Who* fan Robert Woolf. He has been accused of being a puff (Magrs 2010, 116) and Robert tells him “[Y]ou can’t be a puff in a town like our town” (133). Nevertheless, David increasingly comes to the realisation that he does not find girls attractive. The word ‘gay’ can at last be uttered after he sees two boys kissing:

‘He’s ...? They’re ...?’

Karen smiles encouragingly. ‘Yep. Gay as Christmas.’

‘In Darlington? In our town?’

(Magrs 2010, 248–249)

It should also be noted that this book violates the canon of *Strange Boy* – among other details, his father has died before his mother got a new boyfriend, the boyfriend’s mother is American rather than Dutch, and there is no mention of Christopher – although one or other of the book might be an “‘What If?’” universe, ... about how things might have been if everything was different’ (Magrs 2002, 167). Only those with special powers can cross between the Alternate Universes. The use of ‘gay’ finally unlocks David’s identity, just as Captain Marvel uses the word ‘Shazam’ to unlock his superpowers. The contours of heterotopia become easier to explore. He is even able to keep his love of *Doctor Who* and the fantastic. Equally, by appropriating the euphemism ‘A present from Southend’, Hal in *Dance on My Grave* may be able to navigate the choppy waters of the estuary resort. In contrast, the characters in *Boy Meets Boy* had access to the discourse and a supportive heterotopia. There is no lone superhero nor dynamic duo, it is a group that becomes collective saviour to Tony. This heterotopia does seem utopian, although – like the Bakhtinian carnival space – it is licensed/permitted by being both allowed and subject to rules. Categorisation through discourse is always subject to revision.

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## 5 Even better than the real thing

### Fantasy and phantasy in Boys' Love manga

*Anna Madill*<sup>1</sup>

Boys' Love (BL) is an umbrella term for a cluster of genres originating in early 1970s Japanese popular culture which portray male–male sexuality largely by and for women. BL incorporates, with variable and often subtle differentiation, *yaoi*, *shonen-ai*, and – possibly – female-oriented, male–male *shotacon*. The characteristic media in which BL appear are manga, *anime*, illustrated light novels, and computer games. However, BL *dojinshi* – non-professional, but often highly polished productions – are also sold, traded, and uploaded to the internet. Since the late 1980s BL has gained a worldwide audience and commercially translated products are available, as are fan-translated manga, fan-subbed *anime*, language-patches for games, and original work in different languages.

BL manga in commercial translation usually takes the form of books bringing together stories under the name of a single *mangaka* (artist-author) which appeared as one-shots or as longer serialisations in Japanese magazines. An almost essential formula is that a story revolves around a central couple, one of whom is identifiable as the *seme* (top) and the other as the *uke* (bottom), although *reversible* relationships are sometimes explored. BL tend to involve a restricted range of character types, contexts, and plots; however, there is surprising diversity in the genre frames drawn upon. Hence, although virtually all BL might be considered romance of a more or less erotic nature, it spans comedy to crime, tender-love to tragedy, and includes stories in the fantasy genre.

Surveys suggest that the international audience consists predominantly of women in their late teens and early twenties (Castagno and Sabucco 2006–7, cited in Pagliassotti 2008; Li 2009; Zhou 2009). This echoes what is known about the Japanese consumers, although Pagliassotti (2008) suggests that the female fans are much more likely to identify as heterosexual than are their Western counterparts. For instance, in Pagliassotti's English-language survey of BL consumers (n=478) only 46 per cent of female respondents identified as heterosexual and my own ongoing survey of the Anglophone BL fandom (interim n=2155) gives the even lower figure of 41 per cent. My survey also suggests that, internationally, BL attracts a significant minority of individuals of non-hegemonic gender with 8 per cent of my total respondents so

far identifying as non-binary or trans\* gender (while 78 per cent identify as female and 14 per cent as male).

In this chapter I offer a Kleinian psychoanalytic reading of four short BL stories having in common the central motif of the 'doll', interpreted broadly as a humanoid figurine. These are three interrelated fantasy genre stories constituting the collection *Hybrid Child* (Nakamura 2006) and, for contrast, one non-fantasy genre story – *Celluloid Closet*<sup>2</sup> – in the collection *Almost Crying* (Takahashi 2006). I have selected a Kleinian dialect, in part, because it allows me to exploit slippage between the concepts *fantasy* (popular culture genre) and *phantasy* (Kleinian-posed unconscious process). Without conflating the terms, there appears significant similarity in that both denote the following of laws or conventions which, almost by definition, differ from those of reality. Moreover, interestingly for my purpose here, Kleinian theory has a distinct literary ambience in that in phantasy one is considered to 'take in, *personify* and *dramatize* what is encountered' (my italics, Likierman 2001, 65) to the extent that the mechanisms of phantasy may actually simulate human relationships.

### Kleinian psychoanalysis

Melanie Klein provides one of the most influential accounts of the psychology of the earliest months of life, pieced together from her analysis of disturbed older children and adults. For Klein, phantasy is the earliest system of meaning and primary process shaping the human psyche. She suggests, controversially, that a rudimentary ego exists from birth and that phantasy is the process through which the ego develops. The spelling '*phantasy*' is used to connote that this process is primarily the work of the *unconscious* aspects of the ego (Isaacs 1991). Phantasy instantiates an internal reality populated by versions of 'people, things, situations, and happenings' (Klein 1975, 346) from outer reality, modified by the individual's psychological needs. Hence, experience is viewed as a mixture of external reality and internal phantasy, phantasy distorting external reality but also acting as a bridge between the inner and outer worlds essential for psychological development. Klein argues that normal infant development, which lays the foundation of the individual's relationship to the world, requires the successful overcoming of two phases. These are characterised as psychological stances consisting of typical anxieties, defences, and phantasies: the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position.

Klein suggests that, due to limited perceptual ability, the very young infant's experience of the world (largely consisting of the body of the mother) is in the form of pleasant and unpleasant impingements. The world is therefore split in the infant's phantasy into the all-providing good object (the nourishing breast)<sup>3</sup> and the persecuting bad object (the withholding breast). This splitting is a *schizoid* defence mechanism which keeps the good object on which the infant's wellbeing depends safe from the dangerous bad object (see Figure 5.1). What are in effect *part-objects* – fractured-off bits of whole things – are not

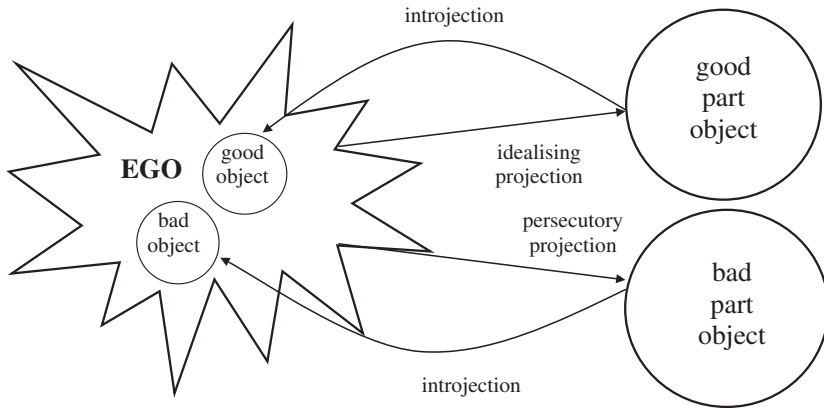


Figure 5.1 Paranoid-schizoid position (0–3 months).

experienced as such by the infant in phantasy and in the ‘unconscious, the internal object assumes the form of a powerful *anthropomorphic* being that inhabits his internal domain’ (my italics, Likierman 2001, 108).

Splitting the world into good and bad aspects occurs alongside the infant’s unconscious *projection* of her own good (loving, welcoming) and bad (destructive, angry) impulses into these external bits-of-things. This process allows the infant to experience these aspects of herself in the external world and, hence, more safely. It also creates the conditions for the projections to be *reintrojected* by the infant to form internal objects in phantasy. In fact, a major challenge of the paranoid-schizoid position is to *identify* with and *introject* a good object around which to develop a stable ego in a cluster of complicated psychological processes known as *projective identification* (Isaacs 1991). However, in Klein’s vision, when infants experience inevitable frustrations, they mete out destructive aggression on offending objects in phantasy leading to the *paranoid* fear of retaliation.

As the infant’s perceptual abilities develop, the possibility increases of relating to the mother and other significant external things as whole objects (see Figure 5.2). Although a whole object can be related to more realistically, the infant has to face ambivalent feelings that these whole objects are both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and her internal representation of the ideal, good object (the all-providing breast) is severely damaged. This devastating experience is termed evocatively the ‘loss of the loved object’ and it catalyses many painful phantasies: ‘his loved object is continually attacked ... is destroyed, torn into pieces and fragments ... and then the whole internal world feels destroyed’ (Segal 1998, 205). In normal development the infant overcomes the depressive position through the experience of good enough care. She begins to experience guilt for destructive actions (in reality and/or phantasy) towards



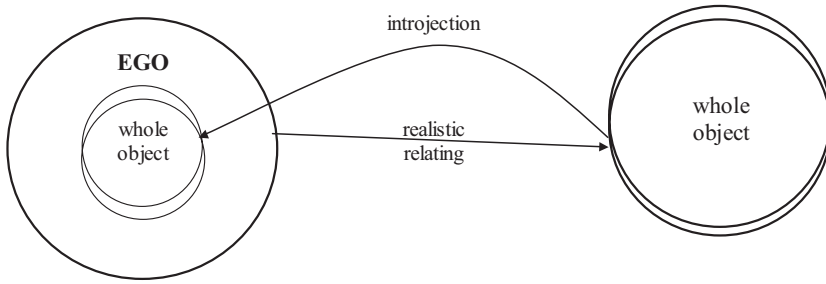


Figure 5.2 Depressive position (3–6 months).

frustrating objects and to make reparation towards them (in reality and/or phantasy) and '[as] it does so it also takes in the damaged and then restored mother, adding these new internalizations as part of the self's inner world' (Mitchell 1998, 21).

The depressive position therefore is the basis of a more mature and mutual form of relating in which external objects are valued in themselves, their limitations recognised and forgiven, and the relationship with them maintained despite inevitable disappointments. This is a difficult task and a person can, in times of stress and if the process of internalising a good loving object is insufficiently secure, become deeply depressed or retreat into reality-distorting, paranoid-schizoid splitting.

Analysing children, Klein was central to the development of play therapy, interpreting the spontaneous scenarios in which they used the toys she provided as an acting-out of their anxious phantasies (Isaacs 19). Her theories, especially concepts such as projective identification, have also proved of immense utility in psychoanalytic therapy (Spillius and O'Shaughnessy 2011). However, Klein has had less impact on the humanities despite early exploration of the depressive position on creativity (Segal, 1998). Stonebridge suggests that literary theory has found her analysis to be 'both too heavy-handed and too normative to be of any use' (1998, 224). This might underlie Mulvey's criticism that, in Klein's notes on *Citizen Kane*, there is 'a tendency to try to figure out Kane and his relationships as though they existed in the real world' (1998, 248). My own approach here is to explore the extent to which BL, at least the stories analysed, might be considered to simulate fundamental psychological process as posited by Klein: specifically the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, and in this way constitute material that may afford the working through of relevant phantasies.

Tamaki Saitō is a major theorist of *otaku*: a Japanese, largely male, subculture of ardent consumers of *anime*, manga, computer games, and related merchandise. Pertinently, *otaku*-oriented artefacts have developed alongside the internet and digital technologies. Saitō (2011) argues that such technologies

have increased dramatically the order of the *Imaginary*. Influenced by Klein, Lacan theorises the *Imaginary* to be ‘composed of the schemata of meaning that arise from our bodily experiences as infants’ (Bracher, 1993, 32) and to consist, predominantly, of images which provide (alien) reflections of oneself with which to identify. Saitō argues that *otaku* may have a specific affinity for *visual* fictions – and highly stylised images are, indeed, a ubiquitous feature manga, *anime*, and computer games. Although the term ‘imago’ was commonly used in early psychoanalytic theories, it was particularly developed by Klein before she settled on the term ‘object’. Isaacs (1948) clarifies that an ‘imago’ denoted something that is unconscious, introjected, represents a person or part-person, and carries somatic and emotional resonances of the relationship with that imagined person. And, as is hopefully now apparent, the ‘doll’ motif promises a useful entry point for a Kleinian interpretation of texts focusing, as Klein does, on the ego, its anthropomorphised objects, and their interactions.

Saitō’s central argument is that the ‘somatic and emotional resonances’ central to understanding *otaku* investment in visual fictions is that of sexuality. This is captured in the subculture concept ‘*moe*’ which, although conveying a highly complex set of phenomena, broadly suggests love for a two-dimensional character (see Galbraith, 2014). Similarly, BL is primarily an erotic genre, with its female connoisseurs – *fujoshi*<sup>†</sup> – considered the predominant group of female *otaku*. In theorising *otaku* culture, Saitō utilises a Lacanian stance in which, commensurate with patriarchal structures, the female is equated with lack. Klein, in contrast, is unusual within psychoanalytic theory in offering a *matricentric* version of psychic development. Hence, in its feminine orientation, Klein may provide an innovative purchase on *fujoshi* sexuality (see also Nagaïke, 2004), even if her theories could be considered to incorporate a ‘not so latent heterosexism’ (Stonebridge and Phillips 1998, 3). BL has similarly been critiqued as heteronormative in terms of its *uke-seme* formula mirroring heterosexual power differentials (e.g., Lunsing 2006). However, *otakufujoshi* and the objects of their interest are considered by majority culture to be peculiar, and their affinity for visual fictions, so amplified in contemporary media, arguably facilitates the expression of a ‘queer’ sexuality. As Saitō states, in ‘anime and manga, the most important are those gestures capable of transcending the context of heterosexual desire’ (2011, 157). In each of the stories I discuss below I would argue that these gestures are discernable.

### ***Hybrid Child*: the ‘doll’ in fantasy Boys’ Love**

*Hybrid Child* is a one-book manga written and illustrated by Shungiku Nakamura. First published in Japanese in 2005 and in English in 2006, at the time of writing an *anime* version of *Hybrid Child* is in production and a new copy this popular manga is priced on Amazon at £65. Historical allusions suggest a setting in the Japan of late *Edo* period (1860s), the fantasy element being the inclusion of ‘hybrid child’ androids who ‘growing and developing in

relation to the amount of love bestowed upon [them] by [their] owner ... are a mirror – neither machine nor doll' (Nakamura, 2006, 3). The book consists of three interrelated stories, each focusing on a different *uke-seme* relationship.

### **Hybrid Child 1: Kotaro and Hazuki**

Eight-year-old Kotaro – head of the wealthy Izumi household – finds hybrid child Hazuki on a rubbish dump and takes him home. Kotaro and Hazuki are inseparable despite attempts by the household to throw Hazuki away and, eventually, the hybrid child begins to walk, talk, and after ten years has grown into a young man. Hazuki turns out to be a hard taskmaster, berating Kotaro for his laziness and making him study but also, because he has a temperature-regulating device, is able to cool Kotaro during the summer heat. When Hazuki collapses, Kotaro takes him to the hybrid child inventor, Kuroda, to be repaired.

The handling of a hybrid child is extremely difficult and delicate. That's why I was so overjoyed when Hazuki finally began to move ... accepted all my commands, obedient, innocent. So why, why, why did he turn out like this?! What did I do wrong?!

(Nakamura 2006, 10)

Kuroda is antagonistic and explains that the hybrid child is just at the end of its lifespan. However, Kotaro begs him to help and the inventor sends him on a mission to find within one week the 'droplet of the moon', suggesting that it might save Hazuki. Kotaro does all that he can but he returns to the inventor in failure, distraught that Hazuki will now die. A year later, Kotaro has begun to make progress applying himself to his studies and, unexpectedly, Hazuki returns to him repaired and with a large bill from Kuroda.

Kotaro and Hazuki's story can be read as providing affordance for re-experiencing the crisis of entry into the depressive position, the scenario suggesting triggers associated with adolescence. An android with the potential to be whatever one wants is a fitting, although developmentally immature, personification the 'good object'. More specifically, when Hazuki was found, he was 'rickety and falling apart' (Nakamura 2006, 38). This further suggests a generally immature psychological state lacking internal integration. We are also shown three other androids on the rubbish dump, pointing to earlier failed attempts to introject and maintain a good object, and the current one – Hazuki – has been under attack by persecutory internal objects represented by the 'members of the household'. Despite these challenges, a good object is eventually successfully introjected and the young hybrid child becomes a viable – fully-grown – internal figure. However, with an extremely idealised good object 'accept(ing) all my commands, obedient, innocent' (Nakamura 2006, 10), and a weak ego, represented by the young Kotaro, that has struggled to preserve its good object, split-off 'bad' parts develop into

what appears to be a persecutory superego represented by the adult android. In fact, the adult Hazuki is a particularly anxiety-provoking phantasy figure in which an idealised loved object is integrated with a persecutory superego, captured in the ability of the android both to chide and to provide comfort. This is an apt representation of a superego-type-phenomenon identified by Klein which consists of a combined parent figure (sometimes conceptualised as the mother-with-a-penis) that is both loved and hated (Hinshelwood 1991).

As described above, the transformation of split good- and bad-part-objects into a well-integrated, but 'difficult' whole is experienced in phantasies belonging to the earliest depressive position as 'loss of the loved object' (Segal 1998). This is a phantasy which is triggered repeatedly throughout life in both mundane and in devastating ways. That the hybrid child's physical integration is noted – 'The join lines between the parts have completely disappeared' (Nakamura 2006, 24) – alongside the fact that he is dying, captures this process in a beautiful metaphor. However, the potential to manage this particular crisis is demonstrated in Kotaro's optimism that another persecutory internal object – Kuroda the inventor – may have helpful aspects, his active attempts at reparation, and his ability to care for the frustrating android who recognises that 'more than anyone else in this entire world he [Kotaro] is concerned for me' (Nakamura 2006, 41). Although in phantasy the loved object is lost, Kotaro is strong enough to withstand this pain and to adapt to life, working hard to develop useful skills. This maturation is an indication of greater integration of internal objects and, hence, of less defensive splitting. As a result, internal bad objects, and so the external world, are experienced as less persecutory. The antagonistic Kuroda *does* provide help and a good object is once again made available in the return of the mended hybrid child, but this is at the cost of a hard-won but mature realisation that good objects also have vulnerabilities and limitations.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the repetitiveness of *otaku*-oriented material, its inherent eroticism, and catalysing of obsessive interest combine to suggest a trauma-based interpretation (see Freud 1922): trauma understood as ubiquitous to the constitution of the human subject (e.g. Lacan 1977). That engagement is trauma-based, is supported by the investment of *otakufujoshi* in creating *dojinshi* parody works that typically consist of short scenarios based on popular culture fictions with added sexual inflection. Arguably, BL *dojinshi*, from which the term *yaoi* originates,<sup>5</sup> is, in its repetitive, erotic, simplicity, ideal for working through particularly resonant, unresolved conflicts. For Saitō, the science fiction *anime* fixture the 'beautiful fighting girl' is the *sine qua non* of male *otaku* desire, interpreted in Lacanian terms as a 'phallic girl': a personage with no equivalent in reality and epitomising perversion (Fenichel 1949; Parker 2008). Interestingly, in *otaku* culture her most conspicuous feature is that of being 'empty', that is of having little motivation or trauma of her own. In contrast, implied in my analysis here (see also Madill in press), the BL couple are in their different ways wounded beings (Silverman 1992). Their 'castration' in relation to patriarchal culture is,

in part, due to their (apparent) homosexuality. In addition, the BL relationship often has an intensely persecutory dynamic which, within the diagenesis itself, seems trauma-based and traumatising. And the first and, as we will see, second *Hybrid Child* stories from a Kleinian point of view appear to underscore the inevitability of repetitive, retraumatising, working through of the depressive position, but also optimism that this can lead to increased adaptation to life.

### **Hybrid Child 2: *Yuzu and Seya***

Master Seya Ichi, a former army officer, is receiving death threats from relatives of people killed in the war. He is tormented by his combat memories and feels that he 'can never be redeemed' (Nakamura 2006, 76), even though he makes active attempts at restitution for his past actions. His young companion hybrid child, Yuzu, is worried that Seya hates him and that this is why he is not growing. However, Seya is kind to Yuzu, and Yuzu cares very much for his master. On the mischievous advice of an adult female android, Yuzu offers himself to Seya, without really knowing what this means, because he wants 'to be able to hear his troubles' (Nakamura 2006, 69).

You've only ever given me kindness. It's not enough! You have to share your pain, your sadness, your anger, your hate. You have to share more of everything with me! Without them I can never grow!

(Nakamura 2006, 89)

Seya is at first shocked but then affectionately engages him, stopping when Yuzu is merely puzzled and then embarrassed. Having been reassured that Seya loves him, Yuzu has grown a little and needs new clothes. While they are shopping, Seya is attacked. He does not defend himself and is temporarily blinded. Yuzu is distraught and Seya says he intends sending him back to Kuroda the inventor to find a better master. Yuzu refuses to go and Seya holds him close, now able to accept his love. Eventually Seya regains his sight, Yuzu grows into a young man, and the two become contented companions.

Yuzu and Seya's story invites engagement with the way in which a depressive episode necessitates further working through of anxieties and phantasies associated with the depressive position. Bion (1963) views the depressive position as a relatively stable state characterised by a realistic relationship with the outer world and ability to make reparation for one's inevitable moments of destructiveness. However, when conflicts are not adequately resolved in infancy, one may be particularly vulnerable to depressive illness. Seya's depression is portrayed as a result of his war experiences, which can be taken to mean any severely challenging external conditions. As the depleted ego internalises the threat, archaic phantasies are reactivated and the ego is persecuted also by internal figures. At such times, trust in good objects is shaken and, as a result, the internal good object – represented by the hybrid child

Yuzu – is shown to be small and weak. Moreover, the ego – Seya – is almost annihilated by feelings of guilt, represented in phantasy as passive acceptance of a life-threatening, retribitional attack. However, Seya is relatively mature and retains his capacity to care for his objects and to attempt to repair them through reparative gestures. Moreover, at this point in his development, he is able to tolerate feelings of depression reasonably well because the good object has been securely introjected (i.e. Yuzu's refusal to be sent away). As Likierman explains:

the human individual continues to depend on the self-nourishing, creative core that was introjected in infancy ... In a harsh world it provides the human individual with no less than the 'foundation for hope, trust, and the belief in goodness'.

(2001, 173)

These qualities allow a more thorough working through of the depressive position and the good object – the adult hybrid child – to be integrated even more securely at the core of the ego as a stalwart, inner companion.

Saitō (2011) argues that what might be thought of as 'low culture' is, typically, 'high-context', meaning that there is a strong link between content and form. *Anime* and manga are good examples as demonstrated in the over-determination of their story and character types. Of particular relevance to my analysis, an implication of such formulaic style is relative constriction of character development and Saitō suggests that complexity is created, instead, in the way that 'a single personality is often divided among multiple characters' (2011, 145). Similarly, Klein offers us a dissociative conceptualisation of normal ego development in which the ego is 'not initially located in a fixed point, but consists, at any one moment, of what has been absorbed or expelled' (Likierman 2001, 166). Of further relevance is the tolerance, in fact celebration, of slippage between narratives in the multi-format, *dojinshi*-saturated *otaku* world. Franchised fictions can take different trajectories in different media and games allow players to traverse branching pathways, making idiosyncratic choices to novel endings on each engagement (Azuma 2009). Similarly, because phantasy does not hold to the standards of rationality, the integrity of a Kleinian interpretation is not harmed by seeming inter-narrative inconsistencies. For example, Kuroda the inventor can be viewed as an inner persecutory object in the first story but, as we shall see, the ego in the third.

### **Hybrid Child 3: *Tsukishima and Kuroda***

Tsukishima and Kuroda develop a highly fractious relationship as young adults, even though Kuroda had been a kind and encouraging friend to the frail Tsukishima as children. However, this tension is recognised as an underlying attraction by their mutual friend Seya. Kuroda makes clockwork

dolls and begins to develop a prototype hybrid child android. Tsukishima is angry that the 'doll' looks like him and he almost destroys it. The clan is involved in a war and Tsukishima, the chief's son, is named leader while Kuroda and Seya leave to fight knowing that 'there could be no possible victory' (Nakamura 2006, 189). Indeed, the clan is defeated and Tsukishima must commit hara-kiri as a high-rank sacrifice. The battle-wounded Kuroda is devastated by the news and he and Tsukishima spend the night together before the latter courageously fulfils his duty. Slumped in his workshop, Kuroda's seemingly lifeless, android prototype uncannily tips over into view. Some time later, Kuroda has developed a trade in mechanical repairs but, when Seya visits, he finds Kuroda to be a bitter man. The prototype is now walking and Kuroda appears interested in it only as a potential product. However, the hybrid child reproduces an affectionate gesture that Tsukishima had made in life – handing him a branch of cherry blossom – and Kuroda, overcome with grief, anticipates a life of loneliness and failed attempts to recreate his beloved friend.

The former story, *Hybrid Child 2* about Yuzu and Seya, explores how a securely integrated good object can sustain one through difficult external circumstances. On the other hand, *Hybrid Child 3* – Tsukishima and Kuroda's story – allows us to experience the torments of depressive ambivalence in which hostility is felt towards a disappointing but also intensely needed and loved object. If too fragile or angry to tolerate depressive ambivalence, the ego may defend itself through rigid reinstatement of archaic splitting mechanisms to keep the good and bad aspects of the loved object apart and seek to alleviate distress through introjecting an artificially passive object as a means of exerting omnipotent control over it in phantasy. And this is what Kotaro attempts to do, the hybrid child being 'a meek and obedient version' (Nakamura 2006, 212) of his friend Tsukishima. However, radical splitting inevitably creates also a strong internal bad object which nearly destroys the good one, as when 'bad-Tsukishima' hits out at the android that looks like his childhood self.

Tsukishima's death can be interpreted as the actual death of an ambivalently loved person or the experience in phantasy of their death because the relationship has been destroyed. This is a significant loss, and a good psychological outcome depends on the ego's ability to reintegrate itself and its good objects. However, here, the ego is in such a disintegrated state that Kuroda's good object – his little 'prototype' – is damaged and severely neglected. But, at least a good inner object exists, and it has a little life left in it to reach out. This allows the ego eventually to begin to repair it and, to a degree, adapt to external reality. Although still fragile, the good object initiates a reparative gesture in phantasy for the destructive actions of the past. This facilitates the experiencing of real grief for the loss of a relationship newly acknowledged to have been important. However, we leave Kuroda irreconciled to his loss, predicting that he will 'continue to recreate him ... probably for the rest of [his] life. Knowing it's futile' (Nakamura 2006, 162).



Power differences between the *seme* and *uke* in BL stories are common and explored in BDSM-like themes, although maybe more usually through relationships in which one partner is rather manipulated by the other in more mundane ways. Relationship power differences are evident in the manga analysed here, with the hybrid child androids epitomising exploitability: 'A "toy" which, through nurturing and love, the owner can raise to conform to his own personal tastes ... a toy representing the height of male fantasy' (Nakamura 2006, 9). However, eroticised power can be treated in BL in a relatively sophisticated way. In *Hybrid Child*, the more usual sexual objectification of women is pointed to visually in the first story in that, of the four discarded androids, Hazuki is the only male. The androids are also shown to be less 'empty' than they would at first appear and to invite interaction as subjects in their own right. Moreover, their 'masters' do not take the opportunity to be sexually abusive: Kotaro is aware of the hybrid child's usual use but 'never thought of doing anything perverted like that' (Nakamura 2006, 10); Seya stops their sexual interaction when he senses Yuzu is too immature; and, although the adult Kuroda is often hostile towards Tsukishima, he invents the hybrid child androids from attachment to his friend and treats them with gruff fatherliness. Finally, this seemingly simple material can also be viewed as exploring the precariousness of existence that depends for its well-being on benign paternalism.

In order to understand some of the specific affordances of the fantasy genre for BL, it is useful to compare *Hybrid Child* with a non-fantasy BL story having also the central motif of the 'doll'. Like *Hybrid Child*, *Celluloid Closet* is concerned with the idea of the perfect, seemingly empty, object holding the promise of fulfilling one's desires. Putatively a comedy, it is a chilling portrayal of an inability to relate to the beloved in a way that appreciates him to be a separate person. As we saw in relation to *Hybrid Child*, fantasy genre conventions may facilitate an interpretation of stories around the ego and its internal objects. On the other hand, although an exaggerated and improbable story, *Celluloid Closet* retains the conventions of realism and appears to invite a different kind of Kleinian interpretation. Approaching this non-fantasy story, operative phantasies need to be inferred from what is shown to us of the protagonists' actual relationship, and personages within the narrative do not appear interpretable as inner objects as they were in *Hybrid Child*.

### ***Almost Crying: the 'doll' in non-fantasy Boys' Love***

*Almost Crying* by Mako Takahashi was first published in Japanese in 2002 and in English in 2006. It is a one-book manga consisting of eight separate stories. In *Celluloid Closet*, Sakurada has started working in a toyshop after school and notices that a young man – Takaido – comes in every restocking day to search the shelves. Sakurada asks if he is looking for something and to his horror, Takaido hugs him with joy: 'Lily! I've finally found you!' (Takahashi 2006, 109). The young man has apparently lost his beloved Lily-doll and

explains that Sakurada is 'not just like her. He is her! Ever since my Lily mysteriously disappeared from my closet, I've been searching for her! This is a fated reunion!' (Takahashi 2006, 110). A photo reveals that Sakurada does, indeed, look very like the lost Lily-doll and the security guard finds Takaido's bag to be stuffed with toys: 'They keep me from being lonely' (Takahashi 2006, 111). Takaido begins to work at the toyshop and is very attentive to Sakurada, who gradually learns to tolerate his ministrations. Thinking that it will release him from the unwanted attention, Sakurada is overjoyed when he sees that the Lily-doll is being re-released and Takaido tries to be happy when he is told the news. However, Sakurada begins to feel despondent that he was 'just a substitute for the doll' (Takahashi 2006, 221) and cold-shoulders Takaido. Spurred into action, Takaido forcibly carries Sakurada to his house, where it is revealed that he had already found his Lily-doll but had not stopped loving Sakurada. Sakurada then accepts that they have a relationship, although he refuses to wear 'Lily outfits'.

Whereas the *Hybrid Child* stories can be viewed as exploration of the depressive position, *Celluloid Closet* can be understood as a parody of a relationship founded on the paranoid-schizoid functioning of one partner. Young children's object relations are often facilitated by a *transitional object* – usually a blanket, doll, or soft toy – which acts as an intermediary between their internal good object and developing more realistic, but also increasingly ambivalent, relationships with external whole objects (Winnicott 1964). Older children and adults can continue to use a *transitional object* invested with the qualities of the 'loved object' to provide reassurance, required less with increasing integration of a good object within the ego. Takaido's Lily-doll appears to be such a *transitional object*, and the fact that he carries a bag of dolls around suggest this to be, for him, a significant reassurance mechanism.

What is unusual about this scenario is that, when Takaido misplaces Lily, he transfers the dominant projection of his good object on to a stranger with similar physical characteristics, and in a particularly distorting way such that 'the early primitive ideal is clung to, controlled and transfixed in its primitive, all-giving form in order to avoid reality' (Likierman 2001, 96). This is an extreme defence against depressive integration of good and bad part-objects and Takaido wards off the loneliness of the 'loss of the loved object' through clinging to paranoid-schizoid forms of relating. Circumstances provide Takaido the opportunity to mature through developing a loving relationship with a person whose agency could anchor unconscious phantasy better in reality. However, the story ends with Takaido still largely unable to distinguish Sakurada from his internal loved object and omnipotent disavowal of his separate existence:

*Sakurada:* Marry?! But I'm a guy!!!

*Takaido:* Yes, god has been a bit of a meanie, but I don't mind. I'm just glad that I can feel you alive and warm ...

(Takahashi 2006, 113)

Mindful of Mulveys's (1998) critique of applying Kleinian theory to fictional characters 'as if they existed in the real world' (which I may not have ducked entirely in relation to *Hybrid Child* either), I make an additional, reflexive move in my interpretation of *Celluloid Closet*. That is, *Celluloid Closet* is interestingly self-referential if understood, on one level, as a parody of *otaku* who, as Azuma (2009) describes sympathetically, during adolescence but increasingly well into adulthood, refuse to relinquish their transitional objects: *anime*, manga, figurines, *dojinshi*. In fact, Saitō sees *otaku* lifestyle to be 'a result of the interactions between the modern media environment and adolescent psychology' (2011, 30). Terrifying phantasies of losing omnipotent control over one's loved object, particularly when mixed with erotic feelings, are likely catalysed in adolescence and can remain powerful throughout life. For example, graphic novel the *Black Project* (Brookes, 2013) portrays an English adolescent boy's attempt to make a girlfriend, quite literally, out of bits and pieces, and similar phantasies of the perfect, empty, female object appear to be explored in Bellmer's famous doll photographs (Grant 2010).<sup>6</sup> These examples assume a male subject who is fetishistic in the psychoanalytic sense of disavowing the castration of the good object/mother (Freud 1961), that is, man's heteronormative double-bind of having to desire an 'object associated with lack' and his attempt to avoid dealing with real women's complexities.

Saitō argues that the predominant object of *otaku* desire, the 'beautiful fighting girl', must be understood entirely as an object in the *Imaginary* that reflects male *otaku* sexuality and which does not speak to the status of real women in contemporary society. While some BL attempts to anchor protagonists in reality, as a genre it is heavily critiqued for not doing so (e.g. Ishida 2015). However, a large part of BL's appeal may be that it facilitates a novel *Imaginary* in that, with a female observer, the male BL couple play out their trauma-filled roles in triangular space inviting radical challenge to phallogocentric Oedipal dynamics (Nagaike 2004). For example, Takaido's effort to hone Sakurada as the perfect object of desire is presented as polymorphously perverse through ambiguation of male and female (including attempted transvestism), equivocal hetero/homosexuality, and play with regard to being in/out of the closet. Moreover, BL may imply critique of patriarchy in that, for a female audience, stories like *Celluloid Closet* present a recognisably gendered dynamic in which the woman is misrecognised by her male partner, like the original mother in infancy, as an all-providing phantasy part-object. Female-oriented, male-male sexuality narratives may bring this into view more clearly through denaturalisation by situating a male subject in the feminised position.

## Reflections

An implication of my analysis is that, at least some, BL may capture and hence facilitate the working through of ubiquitous psychological processes

(see Žižek 1992). Importantly, it may do this in a way that critiques patriarchal solutions and produces alternative queer possibilities. Their formulaic eroticism is ideally suited to the exploration of archaic phantasies in line with Freud's (2001) identification of the 'compulsion to repeat'. Moreover, the fantasy genre may increase the affordance of this fiction's ability to constellate psychological complexes through releasing the narrative from conventions of reality, for example as suggested in my analysis, by making it particularly easy to represent phantastic inner objects within the text.

Psychoanalytic theory is renowned for using traditional narratives to express psychological processes. However, in his later work, Lacan attempted to distance himself from this, for example, downplaying 'the Oedipus complex, seen as a mythical – and so imaginized – version of unconscious organization' (Voruz and Wolf 2007, x). The problem troubling Lacan is that, while acknowledging that human meaning-making partakes of the *Imaginary*, he saw the function of psychoanalysis – at least in some of his writing – to be the reduction of neurosis through bringing symptoms into articulation; that is, into the *Symbolic*. In providing a Kleinian reading of these manga, I have the impression of retelling the stories, albeit in a more conceptual language. The implication is that Kleinian theory feels 'heavy-handed' (Stonebridge 1998) because it appears merely to swap one story for another, never escaping the *Imaginary* where the good object is the breast. As Likierman notes: '[while] Freud's thinking distinguished between theoretical definitions and subjective descriptions, Klein's concept of internal objects appeared to offer no such distinction' (2001, 109). However, for this very kind of reason, her theories may have particular resonances with contemporary popular culture.

Saitō (2011) suggests that what we call 'everyday reality' is predominantly in the realm of the *Imaginary*, since it is largely constituted through levels of *fictionality* differentiated merely by conscious awareness of their mediation (e.g. a TV documentary versus a TV drama). Moreover, he argues that *otaku* have particular affinity for fictionality and ability to navigate its levels. As touched on earlier, marketing of *otaku*-orientated products often uses a mixed-media strategy whereby characters appear in *anime*, manga, games, and sometimes TV series and live-action film (and well as toys and figurines), without requisite for inter-media narrative coherence. And variable story trajectories are the basis of many *otaku*-oriented games, including BL games, and the male–male romance fan fiction of *slash* and *yaoi dojinshi* which homoeroticize the original texts. We might infer a similar affinity for fictionality and insouciance to its different levels in Klein, who has been described as '[moving] with untroubled literalness between phantasy and its objects' (Jacobus 1998, 92–93).

Although dolls do not appear with regularity in BL, it might be suggested that this motif plays a similar role in the stories analysed as the stories play for their readers; that is, they are a medium through which to experience and to work through phantasies without the frustrations, risks, and obligations of 'the real thing'. This may be captured for male *otaku* in the 'beautiful fighting

girl'. However, Saitō notes in the late 1990s an increase in *anime* foregrounding her emptiness as opposed to her joy. For example, in the feature-length iteration of the science fiction *anime* 'Eva', one of the most loved fighting girls, the clone *Ayanami Rei*, appears in giant form absorbing the souls of those dying around her. The hero *Ikari* avoids death and fusion with *Rei*, but it is at the cost of devastating isolation. Similarly, Klein's ([1963] 1997) final paper was a compassionate meditation on the inevitability of human loneliness. None of us really recover from the 'loss of the loved object' and will continue to seek to reinstate it, without hope of success. In *Celluloid Closet*, both Takaido and Sakurada admit their loneliness and, although BL more characteristically have happy endings, *Hybrid Child*, too, concludes with Kuroda the inventor's lament: 'However many years may pass, I remain forever alone' (Nakamura 2006, 163–164).

## Notes

- 1 This research was supported by a grant from the British Academy. Thank you to Melissa Francis for her advice on historical period.
- 2 A reference to Vito Russo's book *Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (1981).
- 3 'Breast' is used as a general term to include, while feeding, the mother's smell, warmth, skin, arms, sound, gaze and, hence, includes the experience of being bottle-fed.
- 4 A visual pun and homophone – 腐女子 – pronounced identically as the Japanese term for 'girls and women' but where the first kanji – 'fu' – has been changed to that indicating 'rotten', so changing the meaning to 'rotten girls'.
- 5 An acronym derived from the phrase *yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi* (no peak, no point, no meaning).
- 6 A link between Bellmer's dolls and *otaku* popular science fiction anime *Ghost in the Shell* is noted by Brown (2010).

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## 6 Turning people into things

### Object relations and posthuman reproduction in weird short fiction

*Lisa Bennett*

When Franz Hiller, physician, meets Beatrice at the Berlin fair – an event displaying wonders of the modern age, ‘automobiles, propeller planes, mechanical servants, difference engines, and other things that would accompany man into the future’ (Tidbeck 2012, 15) – it is love at first sight. His is a visceral, sensual attraction: ‘Franz couldn’t stop looking at her. Her body was a voluptuous oblong, matte skin wrapped tightly over a gently rounded skeleton ... Beatrice was perfect’ (Tidbeck 2012, 15). Similarly, Anna Goldberg meets her partner at the same exhibition and, like Franz, embarks on a monogamous, sexual relationship with it. I use the pronoun ‘it’ here intentionally, rather than ‘him’ – for both characters choose mechanical *things* to ‘accompany [them] into the future’. For Anna, the ideal companion is a steam engine named Hercules; Franz’s love interest is an airship.

That Franz and Anna have unusual taste in lovers in Karin Tidbeck’s story ‘Beatrice’ makes for an engaging – and odd – narrative, but, more importantly, it is how Tidbeck develops these fictional objectum sexual relationships that illustrates a concern with what I have termed ‘posthuman (d)evolution’; that is, a speculation on the nature and future of the human and, in particular, the human body. If evolution is a process that has developed humans into the fallible flesh machines we currently are, then this story – along with short Weird fiction by Robert Shearman, Kirstyn McDermott and Aubrey Hirsch – seems to question the physical and ethical implications of tinkering, so to speak, with natural evolution in the pursuit of scientific ‘advances’ like genetic modification, ectogenetic births (i.e. embryos developed in artificial environments outside of the body), and alterations of the body (e.g. pacemakers, contact lenses, hip replacements, silicone and collagen implants, and so forth). In other words, these narratives investigate instances in which human bodies, and our modes of interacting with one another, are enhanced by technology or replaced altogether.

In the four stories analysed in this chapter, humans either fall in love with objects – as is the case in Tidbeck’s ‘Beatrice’ – or they temporarily become objects – as happens in McDermott’s ‘The Home for Broken Dolls’ (2013), when the protagonist wears a silicone doll suit to be some ‘thing’ other than what she is – or they give birth to objects, which occurs in Hirsch’s ‘Why We Never Talk About Sugar’ (2013) and Shearman’s ‘So Proud’ (2007). All of

these stories speculate on and dramatise a time in which humans and the human body, as we currently know them, have either radically changed or are being made redundant and, it is possible to infer, obsolete. In these fictional worlds, humans appear to (d)evolve as each story unfolds, becoming less independent, free-thinking ‘subject’ and more ‘object’ – or they are left somewhere between the two, as hybrid ‘things’. Weird fiction is known for being ‘unapologetically transgressive, imaginative, and strange’ (VanderMeer and VanderMeer 2011); accordingly, these Weird narratives diverge from ideal visions of human relationships, reproduction and bodies. In so doing, they highlight how we view the world and ourselves in the twenty-first century through material culture, emphasising our increasing reliance upon and integration with the things we have created.

### **Thing theory and subject–object relations**

In his extensive works on the subject of ‘thing theory’, Bill Brown examines the way objects and subjects animate one another; or, put differently, ‘an object’s capacity to materialize identity’ (Brown 2003, 16, 25; Lemaster 2009, 48). Furthermore, Brown explores the notion that the body is ‘a thing among things’ (2001, 4) and in so doing proposes ‘that considering humans necessarily involves the consideration of things’ (2001, 12). A thing, according to Brown, is not the equivalent of an object. Instead, a thing is what an object becomes when its relationship to the human subject has changed. This change in subject–object relations – the moment when the ‘thingness’ of objects is asserted – is most noticeable, Brown argues, when the object stops behaving the way we want or expect it to behave.

As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.

(2001, 4)

Perceptions of things and their uses will change from one society to the next, and interpretations of the ‘thingness’ of objects will inevitably be subjective. This subjectivity, I would argue, reinforces Brown’s view that things ‘do not exist without being full of people’ (2001, 12). A thing overlaps the liminal space between human subject and inanimate object; neither fully one nor the other, it often physically inhabits the latter, but is seen to possess

psychological or emotional traits of the former. Put somewhat differently, we might view a mirror as an object, the person standing in front of it as a subject, and the person's reflection captured in the glass – intangible but nevertheless present; nonexistent without the subject – as a thing.

If, as Brown proposes above, we look through objects to see what they disclose about us but only catch a glimpse of things, then the Weird stories by Tidbeck, McDermott, Shearman and Hirsch allow us to pause and contemplate our interactions with material culture at greater length. These pieces encourage us to reinterpret our position in subject–object relations:

while we may be struck by its otherness, its obduracy, its mulish indifference, we cannot help projecting on [an object] our fears, hopes, and dreams. Personifying, symbolizing, anthropomorphizing are the means by which we turn objects into subjects, making them speak in their very silence. Literary representations of such objects ... can blurt out uncomfortable truths ... even as they also register more elemental anxieties about our relations to the nonhuman.

(Felski 2007, 190)

Of the four stories discussed in this chapter, Kirstyn McDermott's 'The Home for Broken Dolls' offers the most complex exploration of such shifting subject–object relations. Jane, a single Australian woman who lives alone in her (now-deceased) grandmother's house, suffered traumatic and disfiguring burns to her face as a teenager; as a result, she lives a reclusive life, friend to none but the avatars she meets in online chatrooms and to the broken RealDolls™ she rescues. The first doll Jane discovers is ravaged, dismembered and dumped on the side of the road in the middle of the night (McDermott 2013, 103). Like all of the dolls Jane brings home, this one's breasts and genitals have been either physically worn through or else intentionally damaged (103, 107, 114) – they are highly sexualised objects that no longer serve an obvious function, 'things' wearing the shape of broken women. The similarities between Jane and the dolls she cares for are cumulative, but impossible to ignore: even as Jane humanises these woman-shaped pieces of silicone, she herself experiences what it means to be both 'real' and also a 'thing'.

This is dramatised, for instance, when Jane thinks about why she chose to name her first doll 'Esme'. Jane recalls that she:

hadn't been thinking about a name at all. But as she drew a blanket over that exposed and traumatised flesh, as she arranged the tangled wig to conceal the missing eye, her own skin itched in sympathy.

'Poor thing.' The words a near involuntary echo of those she heard all too often, usually whispered behind palms or exchanged between half-turned heads ...

*Poor thing.*

Recycled syllables, tasting of dust and defeat.

Jane shook her head. She wasn't a *thing*, and the *doll* wasn't a thing, the doll was – *Esme*.

(2013, 107)

Thing rhetoric in this passage – that is, using the word 'thing' to convey or inspire multiple meanings – draws attention to Jane's sympathetic position towards the dolls. The 'poor thing' on the table before her conjures up thoughts Jane hasn't previously been able to articulate; she equates her experience of being a 'poor thing' with that of Esme's. Even the choice of name reinforces the kinship she feels with it: *Esme* is but a vowel shift away from *Is me*.

The sympathy Jane feels towards the dolls is complicated. As the growing collection of dolls begins to move and speak like 'real' people, they (things/objects) and Jane (thing/subject) become increasingly interchangeable. The RealDolls™ are not merely anthropomorphised – although Jane, like Franz in Tidbeck's 'Beatrice', does read expressions into their inanimate features (Tidbeck 2012, 15–16) – but their actions, especially once they come to life, are projections of Jane's own subconscious: "that's why I been put here, ain't it? [says Beryl, whose role in the story is explored further below] *I* get angry so *you* don't gotta" (McDermott 2013, 162). This is a work of speculative fiction, and thus readers are most likely meant to take the dolls' coming to life literally; these inanimate objects have become walking, talking beings in the narrative. However, McDermott's choice of words, her musing on the 'thingness' of objects, and the questionable subjectivity of humans in this novella suggest that reading parallels between Jane's psyche and the dolls' behaviour – that is, their sudden mobility and ability to speak are projections of her subconscious – and viewing the dolls as active things in which she is caught up, is not unsupported by the material.

Dolls, once objects, are elevated to the status of things even as Jane reaches a stage in the narrative where she feels her own position as subject is threatened: '*im starting to think ur not a real person*,' says iDollatry63, a man with whom Jane chats online. '*I'm real*, she types ...' (McDermott 2013, 109). It is at this moment of existential uncertainty that 'Beryl', a brash, top-heavy doll, mysteriously appears at Jane's door. Damaged and apparently dumped like the rest of Jane's growing tribe, this doll acts as the spokesperson for the others – she is the catalyst in Jane's transformation from 'subject' to 'thing' and the dolls' from 'object' to 'thing' and 'subject'. Before Beryl's arrival, obvious similarities can be found between Jane and the dolls: they are all scarred, for example, as well as rejected and horribly maimed by the men who once cared for them (the dolls' owners; Jane's father). Jane is characterised as a chronic saviour/fixer/healer: she rescues the first doll because it is broken and abandoned (much as she is and was); she buys the second one online because it is ravaged almost beyond hope of repair (again, much like she is); and she eventually spends much of her time fixing the dolls she has: 'Jane will patch them later this evening, along with any other new mischief the *dolls have done*

to themselves' (120; my emphasis). She grants them agency because she needs to help; she needs to be needed.

Up to the moment when Beryl is fully repaired, however, Jane speaks to the dolls as though they are human without expecting or receiving a reply (98, 99, 100–101, 102, 110–111, 114). Yet once Beryl is named – that is, granted subjecthood, removed from the realm of 'it' and shifted into the realm of 'she/Beryl' – she comes to life (113). From that point onward, all of the dolls speak and move around on their own: their transformation from object to thing is a manifestation of Jane's loneliness and isolation; the only contact she has had with people up to this stage has been virtual. 'Sometimes people don't even realise *they want a thing* till it's staring them straight in the face,' says 'Madge' (120), as the newly aware Beryl becomes increasingly critical of Jane's role as subject/Owner in their relationship. As a projection of all the things Jane (and the dolls) cannot express aloud, Beryl assumes a dominant role in the household – 'Fact is, 'fore I came along, 'fore I gave them a voice, what you were doing for them dolls didn't amount to a hell of a lot', she says (122) – while Jane becomes, figuratively and literally, more silent, more 'thing'.

In the very next scene, Jane suddenly decides to meet with iDollatry63 in person – a date she has been avoiding for two-thirds of the novella. She contacts him online via the doll-lovers' chatroom and arranges to have dinner with him as soon as possible. The instant she closes the chat window on her computer, Beryl enters the room (Jane's doubts about her decision personified) and the other dolls stop murmuring entirely (126). Despite these embodied reservations, Jane goes to iDollatry63's house, where she does not have to wait long to discover why he genuinely does not mind what she looks like: 'The flat, flesh-coloured thing sprawls across one half of the mattress, vaguely person-shaped, vaguely doll-shaped ... Not a doll *shape*, but a full-body doll *suit*' (140). This scene marks Jane's literal transformation from active subject to voiceless 'flesh-coloured thing', when she agrees to wear the suit while having sex with her date. Like the other dolls in this novella, Jane is encased in silicone and, without Beryl's presence, she is effectively silenced: there is 'a thin silicone pouch intended to sit within the wearer's own mouth' (141), which prevents her from speaking, and when she tries to respond (physically and vocally) to iDollatry63's movements, she is chastised and told not to 'spoil it' (145). Later, Jane's silence becomes the focus of a recurring dream: 'she can't speak properly ... And it's right at the point where Jane is forcing fingers into her own mouth, trying to dig out the words trapped beyond the thick and rubbery sheath that stretches from her teeth to the back of her throat ... that she wakes' (147).

Although this sexual experience is not one Jane is keen to repeat, she nevertheless has not lost the desire to relinquish her role as subject, to change places with the dolls, to see herself through the Other/object, and ultimately to become a thing (Halberstam and Livingston 1995, 5). In a moment that echoes the split-personality actions of 'Tyler Durden' in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), Jane's dolls (much like Durden's Project Mayhem 'space

monkeys’) run riot while she is ‘sleeping’. Without Jane’s awareness, but behaving much as Jane herself would, they go to iDollatry63’s house and ‘liberate’ his RealDoll™ – but they also steal the doll-suit in the process. After this rescue mission, more and more dolls are brought into the fold; meanwhile, Jane has to ‘keep out of their way – out of *Beryl’s* way – as much as possible’ (McDermott 2013, 151). One approach Jane takes to avoiding her conscience is to lose herself in ‘thingness’: she wears the doll-suit again, this time on her own terms. When she does, she ‘*sees things differently*, or she tries to, at least. Tries to picture the suit as a permanent fixture, tries to actually feel the silicone fusing to her own skin, moving as she moves, flexing where she no longer can’ (158; my emphasis). Jane sees things – in this case, a posthuman body – as an improvement on the status quo. For her, the thing acts as a barrier between damaged flesh and the subjective touch of others. Getting inside this thing, becoming it however temporarily, is ‘as smooth and perfect a shield as she might ever need’ (158).

### **(Re)producing the posthuman body**

Jane’s positioning as a thing in ‘The Home for Broken Dolls’ has implications for posthuman critiques of the subject, its body and its evolution:

Poised between action and representation, posthuman bodies ... are bodies living outside national, sexual, economic borders. They exceed and override borders by turning bodies into acts and actions in representations. Eliminating the distinction between action and articulation, deed and word, the posthuman body is still saturated with the stories of humanity that circulate around it; it speaks through a language straddling the borders between health/sickness, male/female, real/imaginary. It tells its stories, however, through those already told; it rips off the past to refuse the future. And so the posthuman, alien and marginal like the subaltern, probably cannot speak because it is always spoken through the stories that someone else already told.

(Rabinowitz 1995, 97–98)

This hybridity of posthuman bodies as a borderless space upon which humanity’s stories (read: politics, opinions, desires, expectations) is projected is made manifest in Weird fiction. These stories problematise the issues described above, which are further articulated by Alexandra Chasin, thing theorists like Bill Brown, and new materialists like Diana Coole, Samantha Frost and Jane Bennett. In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Bennett explores the concept of ‘thing-power’, which ‘gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness’ (2010, xvi). Bennett likens thing-power to ‘a childhood sense of the world as filled with all sorts of animate beings, some human, some not, some organic, some not’ and argues

that thing-power is 'a good starting point for thinking beyond the life-matter binary, the dominant organizational principle of adult experience' (20). What Bennett is describing here is more than anthropomorphism or pareidolia; instead, like Coole and Frost, she is challenging preconceived ideas about 'the nature of matter and the place of embodied humans within a material world ... including the normative sense of the human and its beliefs about human agency' (Coole and Frost 2010, 3-4). One way of exploring the role of the posthuman body in 'the denaturalization of the conceptual basis for distinguishing between Subjecthood and Objecthood', as Chasin puts it, is to

ask how objects are not passive, or how they act socially. How do objects participate in social negotiations, in the evaluation and constant transvaluation of the categories – such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and nationality – that are implicated in human identities ... and in the practices that produce, re-produce, and deconstruct those categories? (1995, 74)

In their Weird depictions of human/object reproduction in their stories, Tidbeck, Shearman and Hirsch have already begun to answer these questions, along with ones 'pertaining to life forms themselves. What kind of ethical value should we attribute to synthetic life forms and according to what criteria?' (Coole and Frost 2010, 22). This question is illuminated through a consideration of the history of the commodification of the female body in particular.

In her discussion of models of childbirth depicted in literature published during the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, Andrea Henderson highlights the correlation between mother-child and subject-object relations: 'the image of the infant as an object in relation to its subject mother gave rise to an opposed image of the mother as an object in relation to her subject infant' (1991, 101). Furthermore, Henderson observes that, in works like *Moll Flanders*, 'Childbirth appears to be just another form of economic activity in a world where everything is commodified' (101-102) and where the mother's body is viewed as a sort of machine. In Tidbeck's 'Beatrice' the mechanisation of reproduction is made literal, although in this instance it is the father's body – and the child's – that is a machine.

In 'Beatrice', there is obvious desire, on Franz and Anna's parts, to be *inside* their objects, to connect with them, to *become one with them* in a way that they never experience with each other on a human-to-human level. This desire exemplifies the posthuman redistribution of human identity: the conflation of and interference between 'difference-from-others' and 'difference-from-self' as described by Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston (1995, 10). The 'refusal to distinguish absolutely or categorically between bodies and their material extensions' (17) is evident when Franz 'thought of Beatrice [the airship] while caressing her picture in the catalogue. Her smooth skin, her little gondola. How he wanted to climb into her little gondola' (Tidbeck 2012, 16). However,



when Beatrice II arrives (a replica of the airship ‘Beatrice’ that he fell in love with at the fair, since ‘she’ was only the prototype), she ‘remained cold and distant, no matter how Franz tried to warm their relationship ... he made love to her with great care. Nothing seemed to get her attention’ (19). By contrast, Anna’s relationship with ‘Hercules’, the steam engine, appears to progress well:

especially when her belly started to swell. The pregnancy was uncomplicated, even though Anna sometimes complained of strange sensations in her stomach. When Franz laid an ear to her belly, he could hear clicking and whirring sounds in there.

(2012, 19)

Human interaction here is secondary to subject–object relations. Throughout the story, both Franz and Anna are oblivious to the potential intimacy of their human relationship. They both share the same warehouse space, they share the heat of Hercules’ oven, they share meals, and Franz shares in Anna’s experiences of pregnancy, even to the point of delivering her baby – and yet they never really connect. Both are more concerned with their inanimate lovers than they are with each other. After Anna gives birth to a cyborg mecha-baby, she bleeds out in the warehouse, but not before she asks Franz to put her corpse into Hercules: ‘I want to be inside him’ (20). Upon her death, Anna (once-subject) becomes cinder-object, while the thing that is her child becomes, from that point onward, the narrative’s central subject and focus of Franz’s attention.

Similarly, in Aubrey Hirsch’s ‘Why We Never Talk About Sugar’ object-children are established as the focus of the narrative once the idea of human–human intimacy is taken out of the reproductive equation: ‘While the details remained mysterious, scientists and poets agreed that reproduction had become divorced from sex, and now required only love’ (Hirsch 2013, 130–131). This ‘love’ is not a manifestation of romantic sentiment or emotion, but is instead the product of capitalism: the women become pregnant with the *things* they love too much, the object-children reflecting the fetishisation of material culture.

In the best of cases, the things were small: a handful of fabric covered buttons, a miniature ceramic panda, a pair of jade earrings ... A woman in California was ripped in half when her greedy husband finally convinced her of the lovable qualities of the Bentley GTC.

(Hirsch 2013, 131)

These ‘children’ are products, their physicality emblematic of posthuman bodies ‘determined and operated by systems whose reproduction is – sometimes partially but always irreducibly – asexual: capitalism, culture, professions, and institutions, and in fact sexuality itself’ (Halberstam and Livingston 1995, 17). In this story and in Robert Shearman’s ‘So Proud’, the object-births

present images of – to use Susan M. Squier’s phrase – a denaturing of the human being and human identity (1995, 119). They reimagine the role of the body and the effects of reproduction in a moment in which what it means to be human is being redefined by cultural theory and science.

These representations ‘call into question the totalized notion of a human being (body-and-soul, the narrative of a life) in order to affirm other multiple identities and positionalities’ (Squier 1995, 119). In Hirsch’s story, there is a severing of the link between physical intimacy and procreation, between being a lover and being a parent. In order to stop *producing* – to stop being object-factories – all women must repress human emotions: ‘women had to watch out for themselves. We learned not to love. Our flat bellies became a sign of our self-control’ (Hirsch 2013, 132). Furthermore, objects in this story demonstrate a capacity to act, if not full-blown subjecthood: cars and palm trees and rocking chairs become things – ‘big things, dangerous things’ (132) – with the power to split a mother’s body in two, to disrupt ‘natural’ reproductive methods, to compel human subjects to stifle instincts and feelings like love.

The objects born in Hirsch’s story are impossible to love; even worse, they are quite easy to acquire. Value, as Georg Simmel observes, ‘is never an inherent property of objects, but is a judgement about them made by subjects ... we call those objects valuable that resist our desire to possess them’ (cited in Appadurai 1988, 3). For the women in Hirsch’s story, ‘Morning sickness aside, these pregnancies didn’t cause much discomfort. The weight gain was minimal, the births were easy’ (Hirsch 2013, 131). Little value is placed on these ‘babies’ because they are not flesh-and-blood but Other; for the most part, they are worthless trinkets.

Likewise in Shearman’s ‘So Proud’, the sense that the (nameless) wife’s first pregnancy has no value – for the (nameless) husband in particular – is highlighted by the parents’ reaction upon seeing their newborn: ‘It wasn’t what either of them had expected. It wasn’t a baby, or not a human baby, at any rate – instead, they were looking at a Chesterfield sofa’ (Shearman 2007, 150). At first, the husband is by turns sulky and angry because of his wife’s inconvenient pregnancies – the sofa, for instance, is far too big and ‘classy’ for their tiny apartment, so they discard it by throwing it into a dumpster – and he chastises his wife for being ‘a bit abnormal in the baby department’ (152) when she gives birth to an *escritoire* only a few days after they’ve disposed of the Chesterfield. It is not until the object-children prove to be commercially valuable that the husband shows interest in the products of his wife’s body: ‘The next time she fell pregnant he didn’t get angry at all’ (154).

After discovering that the *escritoire* is, in fact, an antique from the reign of George III, the husband is only too willing to be involved in the reproduction of similar objects; indeed, he begins to treat his wife’s body as a machine.

Over the next few weeks she produced a grandfather clock, two sixteenth century tea chests, and an ornate dining table designed to seat a party of

twelve ... a Victorian standing lamp ... a whimsical framed portrait of four dogs playing poker ... [a] gold statuette of Vishnu ... [a] set of brass toasting forks ... a four-poster bed.

(2007, 154–155)

Whereas unconventional sex in McDermott's 'The Home for Broken Dolls' is a sterile, fruitless and silent act between subject and object, and sex in 'Beatrice' involves an 'inhabiting' of the object, conventional sexual relations between two subjects in Shearman's story leads to a manufacturing of marketable objects; birth becomes a production line rather than a means by which genetics and ancestral lines are reproduced. Despite how much money they receive for these 'children', however, implicit in both Hirsch and Shearman's stories is the sense that unmediated human children are unattainable and, therefore, most valuable. Thus at the end of 'So Proud', we see the nameless wife searching for traces of herself in the face of the one object-child she keeps: the cheap, stainless-steel kettle that '[fell] out of her body' immediately after she'd given birth to an opulent four-poster bed.

She'd all but given up looking at her children for any signs of resemblance, to see whether they took most after Mummy or Daddy. However impressive it might have been on its own terms, the four-poster bed was really just another four-poster bed; she knew intellectually it was of her flesh, but she felt no bond to it. But the kettle was something else. She couldn't work out why they looked so similar; the spout didn't look like her nose, the handles were nothing like her ears. Maybe it was just because it was a bit tarnished, a bit dirty, and it wouldn't go for much in Oxfam.

(2007, 155–156)

The value of this kettle is not in its worth as an object, but instead in its 'thingness'. Neither child nor functional appliance (the wife hides the kettle in the pantry so her husband will not find it, so it is never used), it is commercially insignificant but nevertheless crucial in reflecting the subject's own identity.

In these four Weird stories, it becomes apparent that not only is 'the world of things [advancing] on the human' (Brown 2001, 12), as Walter Benjamin once claimed, but it has *already* advanced. Upgrading inanimate objects into things (if not independent subjects) in fiction – granting objects a sense of interiority and/or agency (Brown 2003, 7) – dramatises their intermediary role in human interaction and reproduction in a cultural moment when, more and more frequently, such exchanges are commodified; when people 'connect' via text message, email, smartphone; where we view one another at great distances through greasy fingerprints on hand-held screens; where our voices are dissembled and transmitted by fibre-optic cables and satellites, scattered around the world, then reassembled by graphics chips and speakers; where we can share intimate spaces without necessarily sharing physical contact,

keep *in touch* without actually touching; and where we develop unprecedented attachment to the objects that provide such connections.

Communication devices may hurry us down the path to posthumanism, yet it is only when objects stop functioning – or are prevented from functioning – as they ought to that we are confronted with their thingness (Brown 2001, 4). When hyper-idealised sex dolls are worn out or broken, they no longer serve their purpose; they graduate from being useful objects to being other, uncannily human-like ‘things’, as is evident in McDermott’s story. When diamond watches, jade earrings, cherrywood rocking chairs or antique escritoirs from the reign of George III do not function as jewellery or timepieces or writing desks, but instead emerge from the wombs of human women, as is the case in Hirsch’s ‘Why We Never Talk About Sugar’ and Shearman’s ‘So Proud’, then these objects have stopped doing their jobs. No longer clearly defined as ‘objects’, they have become human-born ‘things’, akin to the hybrid human/object cyborg offspring born to Anna in ‘Beatrice’, a coal-eating baby with pistons fused with flesh and muscle. These things may be treated as commodities – the steam-driven child is the perfect consumer, the broken RealDolls™ continue to be marketed and bought in chatrooms on the internet, the furniture-babies in ‘So Proud’ are sold off one by one – yet their connections to the human subjects who bore them remain palpable in these texts. Borders between subject, object and thing blur as humans *produce* instead of *reproduce* in these stories; the impossibility of literally or figuratively giving birth to *things* (cars, antique furniture, mecha-daughters, autonomous RealDolls™) highlights cultural anxieties about the (d)evolving posthuman body and its inability to separate itself from the objects it has created.

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## 7 'Everything's interconnected'

### Anarchy, ecology and sexuality in *Lost Girls* and *Swamp Thing*

Matthew J.A. Green

Back when I was doing *Swamp Thing*, which was ostensibly a horror comic ... I decided ... to try and link up the elements of fantasy horror from our imaginations – werewolves, vampires, zombies and the like – with real life horrors – racism, sexism, pollution, the collapse of the environment – and thus lend these social issues some of the weight that fantasy fiction could offer.

(Moore 2006)

Alan Moore's tenure on *Swamp Thing* ran from late 1983 through to autumn 1987. During this period, Moore and his collaborators produced a commercially successful and socially engaged series that defied the censorship of the Comics Code Authority in its depictions of sexuality, drug-taking and fantasy horror. Moore's work on the title helped transform what could be depicted in mainstream comics, as his politically minded treatment of fantasy drew directly on the underground comics of the 1970s. But Moore's tenure on *Swamp Thing* also looks ahead both to his more recent work in the fantasy genre and to his subsequent attempt to revitalize the underground press with the magazine *Dodgem Logic* (2009–2011). The overlapping of different fantasy worlds with the reality of readers is particularly significant in *Lost Girls*, a pornographic crossover event in which Lewis Carroll's Alice, J.M. Barrie's Wendy and L. Frank Baum's Dorothy undertake an adult decoding of Wonderland, Neverland and Oz. Sexual freedom stands at the heart of Moore's politics and *Lost Girls* thematises this position in a more overt and sustained manner than any of Moore's other fictional works, playing with readerly expectations in ways that challenge the simplistic opposition of fantasy and history. Considered together, *Swamp Thing* and *Lost Girls* provide a powerful testament to Moore's lifelong political and intellectual engagements, yielding particular insight into the ways in which his work deploys fantasy as part of a larger project of social intervention.

Shortly after leaving *Swamp Thing*, Moore described his work on the series as 'trying ... to take some possibly unpopular political beliefs and to make them accessible' (Moore 1987). In particular, these beliefs relate to environmentalism and anarchism, but it was horror and incest that appear to have first

caught the censors' attention. Moreover, it is in the relationship between the lead female character, Abigail Cable, and Swamp Thing that Moore's political engagements manifest themselves most directly. Issue 29, 'Love and Death', is told predominantly in a past-tense narrative depicting Abigail's realisation that her husband Matt's work colleagues are 'recorporated' murderers; the plot is interrupted from the start by post-traumatic flashbacks which chart a parallel realisation that she has unknowingly engaged in multiple instances of incest with her uncle, Anton Arcane (who had possessed her husband). The issue, which violated CCA prohibitions against depictions of the 'walking dead' and of 'sexual perversion' (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund 2014), was published without the CCA seal. As Andrew Edwards argues, 'the depiction of undead characters tugging at Abby in a double-page spread no doubt set alarm bells ringing' and 'the incest theme must have set off the equivalent of Defcom 1 at the CCA' (2012). In fact, the main issue must have been incest not zombies for the CCA approved the next issue, 'A Halo of Flies', with its seal sharing cover space with John Totleben's image of undead hands clawing Abigail away from *Swamp Thing*. Reference to incest returns in issue 31, at which point *Swamp Thing* became the first mainstream series to publish outside the Code.

'A Halo of Flies' initiates the American Gothic story arc – 'a shockwave of nightmare ripples out across the sleeping continent' (Moore, Bissette and Alcalá 1984, 1) – and here the conjunction of fantasy horrors and real-life horrors recalled by Moore begins in earnest. The two-part 'Nukeface Papers' (issues 35 and 36), for example, tackles the nuclear power industry by creating a supernatural villain, 'Nukeface', addicted to nuclear waste. Nukeface's murder of Swamp Thing in issue 36 illustrates the potency of nuclear energy's threat to the environment, while the final full-page image, in which he walks off into the distance framed by clippings from existing newspaper accounts of nuclear disasters, directly links the story world with the historical reality of its readers (Moore, Bissette and Totleben 1985c, 23). This overlapping of worlds itself links back to the unexplained appearance of two unidentified characters in 'Halo of Flies' (Moore, Bissette and Alcalá 1984, 12), figures whom readers familiar with the wider DC universe would recognise as Lyla Michaels and the Monitor from the *Crisis* storyline. A 12-issue series with multiple tie-ins from other titles, *Crisis* ran from early 1985 to 1986 and was designed to clean up the continuity issues that had accrued over the previous 50 years and which had resulted in the creation of multiple alternative universes. As Swamp Thing's erstwhile occult mentor, John Constantine explains, the crisis within the storyworld revolves around the end of the multiverse:

A whole series of parallel universes, parallel Earths ...

Something's eating its way through them, like a maggot munching through a stack of maps.

In order to survive, the remaining worlds are being sort of folded together, making them stronger.

(Moore, Bissette and Totleben 1986, 7)



The idea of consolidating multiple realities and the accompanying image of multiple universes overlapping, which appears in *Swamp Thing* issue 46 (Moore, Bissette and Tottleben 1986, 7) and elsewhere in the *Crisis* series, operate as powerful metaphors for the interaction between fantasy worlds and consensual reality, a relationship thematised directly in the dialogue between Swamp Thing and Constantine:

ST: Why ... should physical destruction ... affect the immaterial realms ... ?

C: Everything's interconnected, stupid.

(Moore, Bissette and Tottleben 1986,10)

Constantine's comment illustrates the overarching message of Moore's *Swamp Thing*, which presents an anarchistic comment on freedom that emphasises the interconnection of sexuality, ecology and politics.

To the extent that the series organises itself around these topics and presents a story world open to the interchange between the fantastic and the real, *Swamp Thing* operates as a microcosm of Moore's oeuvre as a whole. Sexuality in *Swamp Thing* becomes the central site from which to explore the twin concept of interconnectedness and mutuality, which have a long history in anarchist thought and which are directly linked to ecology in the thought of contemporaneous writers such as Murray Bookchin. Bookchin's seminal text, *The Ecology of Freedom*, first published in 1982, details his development of 'social ecology', which 'has its origins ... not merely as a cognitive dimension of epistemology but as an ontological consociation with the natural world' (2005, 114). Bookchin calls for 'a fresh awareness of the relatedness between things and an imaginative insight into the possible' and he argues that pre-literate societies conceptualised their connection to nature as 'a procreative relationship' expressed overtly in various fertility rites (2005, 83, 129). Though Moore does not reference Bookchin directly, *Swamp Thing* similarly identifies sexuality as a fundamental aspect of ecology's social dimension. Thus, in 'Rite of Spring', an idealised vision of the interaction between the human and natural worlds is realised metaphorically through Swamp Thing's sexual relations with Abigail Cable:

In him, I ride the amber sap, oozing through miniature labyrinths.  
Clusters of insect eggs burn like nebulae, suspended in their unique and  
vine-wrought cosmos ...

Through him, I sprawl with the swamp, sopping, steaming, dragonflies  
stitching neon threads through the damp air surrounding me ...

Beyond him I wrestle the planet, sunk in loam to my elbows as it arches  
beneath me, tumbling endlessly through endless ink.

The bark encrusts my flanks. The moss climbs my spine to embrace my  
shoulders ...

We ... are ... one creature ...

(Moore, Bissette and Tottleben 1985c, 17)

The page layouts and images depicting this experience – in which panel borders are removed such that images of Abigail and Swamp Thing merge with representations of the natural world – reinforce this dissolution of barriers and align an ecological sensibility with the hermetic belief in the correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm. This investment of natural systems with magical meanings foreshadows the quest for knowledge that motivates the American Gothic/*Crisis* storyline, but it also reveals the way in which *Swamp Thing* co-opts the *Crisis* narrative to represent an expansion of consciousness.

Moore's move away from mainstream comics in the late 1980s left him more time to devote to projects beyond the purview of corporate interest, but *Swamp Thing* represents a point of continuity between these two phases of his career. October 1988 saw the publication of 'The Mirror of Love', a poem depicting a history of homosexuality co-illustrated by Stephen Bissette and Rick Veitch, both of whom were longstanding collaborators on *Swamp Thing*. The poem counterpoises a history of sexuality, illustrated by Veitch, with what, given Moore's opposition to organised religion, must be considered a fantastical space inhabited by two angels, illustrated by Bissette. The historical sections begin by subverting the cultural assumptions about what constitutes natural sexuality, 'things loved freely once, ignoring gender', then chart a dialectic of love and oppression, and culminate in the question, 'As we approach the future, will Utopia's spires hove into view, or death-camp chimney stacks?' (Moore, Bissette and Veitch 1988, 2, 9). Bissette's angels, meanwhile, are lovers who serve as potential points of resistance from within the Judeo-Christian tradition (in line with the belief popularised by Milton that these angels are intersexed) and they also provide the narrative frame: 'While life endures we'll love, and afterwards, if what they say is true, I'll be refused a heaven crammed with Popes; Policemen; Fundamentalists, and burn instead, quite happily with Sappho, Michaelangelo and you' (Moore, Bissette and Veitch 1988, 9). 'The Mirror of Love' was the first item in the anthology *AARGH!*, a title glossed on the contents page as 'Artists Against Rampant Government Homophobia'. *AARGH!* harnessed creative talent – and mobilised political commitment – from across the UK and US comics scenes in opposition to Clause 28, which banned reference to same-sex relationships within the UK school curriculum. The collection thus highlights the cross-over between mainstream publications (Marvel, DC, the *Guardian*) and the underground, but it also anticipates two of Moore's most enduring graphic novels: *From Hell*, illustrated by Eddie Campbell, and *Lost Girls*, illustrated by Melinda Gebbie. Both of these works started out in the pages of *Taboo*, a fantasy horror co-created by the *Swamp Thing* team of Bissette and John Totleben, and both projects interrogate the intersection of violence, gender and sexuality within larger cultural contexts.

The emphasis on sexuality is particularly overt in *Lost Girls*, which, perhaps not coincidentally, is also the more fantastical of the two texts. *Lost Girls* places Alice, Wendy and Dorothy together in the fictitious Austrian Hotel Himmelgarten on the cusp of World War 1. The predominant chapter structure

involves one of the three female protagonists recounting earlier, often traumatic, sexual experiences while observing, or engaging in, the sex-play of the other two. The characters and plots that inhabit and structure these memories are drawn from the more iconic parts of Carroll, Baum and Barrie's texts such that these works of children's fantasy appear almost as screen memories, nearly (but not quite) masking the sexual experience at the core of each recollection. Thus, chapter 9 transforms Alice's encounter with the White Rabbit into a metaphor for childhood sexual abuse, while chapter 28 identifies the Wizard of Oz as Dorothy's father, with whom she engages in apparently consensual – if increasingly unsatisfying – sex as a young woman. Captain Hook, meanwhile, becomes an aristocrat who sexually exploits Peter in chapter 25 and is defeated in chapter 27 by the sexual assertiveness of Wendy, whose vagina becomes the crocodile (Hook's nemesis) from Barrie's version.

*Himmelgarten* translates as 'Sky Garden', a clue to its function as a nexus between utopian fantasy, in which sexuality is aligned with freedom, and a dystopian world in which the darker forces of history pervert sexuality into violence. The hotel thus operates both as a meeting point and as a base from which Alice, Dorothy and Wendy can explore other sexually charged spaces. They make two such journeys, to a tropical island in the Bodensee, which is an even more fantastical environment for sexual experimentation, and to Paris, for the premiere of Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. Paris, depicted in chapter 10 ('Stravinsky') operates as a portal, opening their sexual journey as a threesome, for this is the first time Wendy joins Alice and Dorothy's sexual coterie, while the visit to the Bodensee in 'Snicker-Snack' (chapter 20) depicts the high-point of fantasy and sexual freedom, precipitating a descent into darker themes in the text's final part. Visually, the development of the protagonists' sexuality is communicated through the page layout. In 'Stravinsky', their sexual encounter is narrowly circumscribed by an increasingly violent audience, and appears dominated by the artistic vision of Stravinsky and Vaslav Nijinsky (see Figure 7.1); in 'Snicker-Snack', the page layout is the same, but here the top panel is devoted to the three women, who inhabit a magical realist space and demonstrate a fluidity of identity throughout their interactions with numerous lovers of different races and species (see Figure 7.2). In the intervening chapters, the structure of the narrative and of the page layouts largely relegates the sexual activities of the coterie to the margins, making way for a fuller exploration of their personal histories and other relationships. Across these chapters it becomes increasingly evident that for these characters the quest for carnal knowledge has become a process of sexual healing. Moreover, this process of discovery and recovery is enabled by an opening-out of sexuality via the embrace of polyamory and the removal of what Judith Butler describes as the 'highly rigid regulatory frame' that constrains gender performance and sexual practice (1999, 43). There is no suggestion that any act of consensual sex is unusual and all sexual preferences are presented without comment or explanation. Though all of the characters are cisgender, the extensive use of role-play celebrates a fluidity of gender roles



Figure 7.1 Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie, *Lost Girls*, Chapter 10, page 6. © 2006 and 2009 Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie.

and sexual orientations such that *Lost Girls* disseminates a set of fictions that compete with the ‘regulatory fictions’ described by Butler, while also remaining sensitive to ‘sexuality and its implication in various dynamics of discursive and institutional power’ (1999, 43, xxvi).

Farah Mendlesohn’s description of four different types of fantasy – ‘the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive, and the liminal’ (2008, xiv) – can





Figure 7.2 Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie, *Lost Girls*, Chapter 20, page 4. © 2006 and 2009 Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie.

help us map the ways that *Lost Girls* uses the genre to explore the complexities and ambivalences of sexuality. In particular, the complicated negotiation between the forces of (military) history and (sexual) imagination that underpins the plot of *Lost Girls* is manifested in a shift in the predominant type of fantasy structuring the text. Initially, *Lost Girls* presents itself as a portal quest, in which 'a character leaves her familiar surroundings and

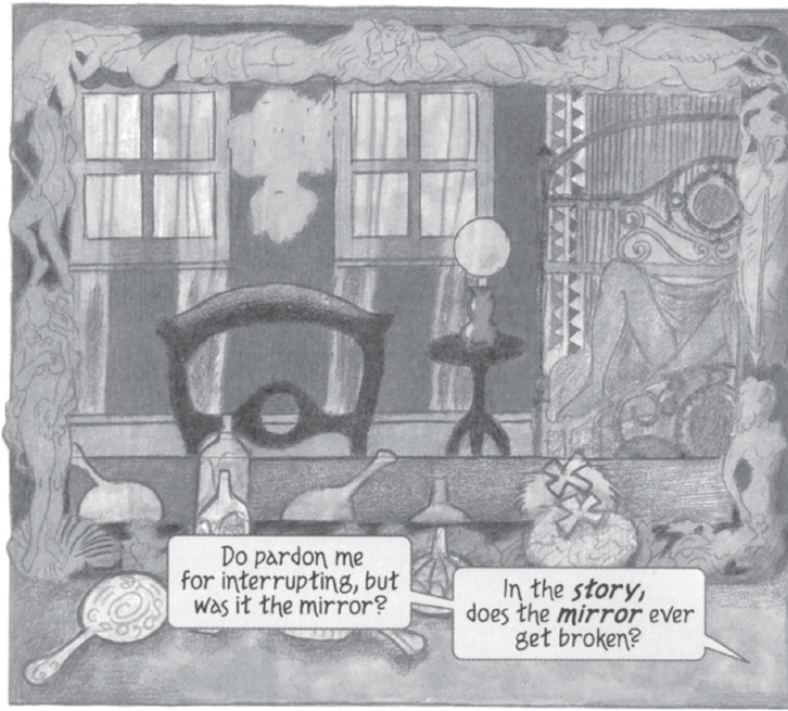


Figure 7.3 Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie, *Lost Girls*, Chapter 1, page 2, panel 4. © 2006 and 2009 Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie.

passes through a portal into an unknown place' (Mendlesohn 2008, 1). It opens with a chapter whose title, 'Mirror', echoes the 'Mirror of Love', and the first panel introduces a very literal mirror of love, placed within a baroque erotic frame and used as a central component in Alice Fairchild's auto-eroticism (See Figure 7.3, Moore and Gebbie 2009). Nico Dicecco argues compellingly that 'the mirror brings together sexuality and the comic book form to highlight the audience's role, as a desiring subject' (2012, loc. 1791). Further, she suggests that by drawing on each reader's prior acquaintance with Alice, Dorothy and Wendy, the text's metanarrative reflections invite 'us to recognize ourselves in what we read' (2012, loc. 1939). This process of recognition is further complicated, however, by the mirror's prior associations with the portal quest and the harrowing journey of self-discovery that we undertake with Alice: 'I recall that there was something very important, very *fragile*. But then a terrible *thing* happened and it got *broken*' (Moore and Gebbie 2009, 1.2). This disclosure, related by Alice, who at this point is both masturbating and dissociating, further links fantasy with the interplay between the narrative construction of identity and repressed or distorted

memories: 'The mirror never breaks. The mirror never melts. / Not any more' (Moore and Gebbie 2009, 2.1). Unlike in Carroll's texts, the object of Alice's quest is neither to escape mundanity nor to return to it, but rather to move into a new phase of post-traumatic growth characterised, and facilitated, by the development of new imaginative and sexual experiences. Rather than having the mirror transport Alice, it becomes an object that Alice takes with her, a symbol of the dissociation initiated by childhood sexual abuse. Leaving the mirror behind thus becomes a metaphor for sexual healing in which she is able to imaginatively reconstruct her life story and identify with her former self: 'As for my looking glass ... / I once thought part of me was stuck inside it, but not now. We've *rescued* her. Now it's just a beloved old thing' (Moore and Gebbie 2009, 30.3).

However, though on one level the mirror represents a certain psychological blockage, it also comes to stand for the power of the imagination to deal with and work through traumatic experiences. It is in this capacity that the mirror has also operated as the framing device through which we as readers experience *Lost Girls*, and when it is broken by an invading German soldier (Moore and Gebbie 2009, 30.5), it is suddenly clear that the portal quest has been hijacked by an intrusion fantasy. 'Where the portal-quest fantasy is a fantasy of the world Re-made or of Healing, the intrusion fantasy is a fantasy of entropy and resistance to entropy' (Mendlesohn 2008, 181); but *Lost Girls* inverts the normal structure, as here the real or historical world invades the fantasy world rather than the other way around. This inversion is most overt in 'Snicker-Snack', in which 'the *sub*-surface, the sense that there is always something lurking' (2008, 116) visually translates into the sequential images that detail the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and Sophie, Duchess von Hohenberg. History thus presented appears as both nonsensical and inevitable:

For an hour we frolicked, kissed and frigged without a tourist anywhere.  
Presumably they were all off at this Archduke's parade we'd heard about.

From my lagoon of legs, the idea of people holding parades and wearing  
clothes seemed alien and unreal ...

Another world, where dismal and nonsensical affairs were endlessly  
occurring.

(Moore and Gebbie 2009, 20.10)

Here Moore twists the Carrollian satire, in which recognisable characters and comportments are parodied in the figures and logics of Wonderland, repositioning nonsense in the domain of history rather than fantasy. In these places where history intrudes, the exploration of sexuality and vulnerability becomes far more disturbing as *Lost Girls* realises Moore's ambition for art that can 'keep commenting upon our own cultural progress, upon our own emotional or intellectual progress' (Moore and Gebbie 2012).



But, it would be a mistake to see the distinction between sexuality and war or between fantasy and history as absolute. Just as sexuality and war are both constituted by desire, so too are the worlds of fantasy and history underpinned by imagination. Even as it heralds the destruction of the fantasy world – ‘And the spell was broken, just like that’ (Moore and Gebbie 2009, 20.7) – the invasion of history undertakes a necessary work within the text for dismantling the fantasy dispels the illusion that sexuality exists distinct from public life. Alice perceives that the political turmoil consuming the world outside Himmelgarten allows the remaining guests to indulge their innermost desires: ‘What a pity it took the Archduke’s assassination to drive your less liberal guests away, allowing this splendidly good-natured orgy’ (Moore and Gebbie 2009, 22.1). But rather than revealing a hidden core of pure sexuality untarnished by worldly interests, the ensuing scene reinforces the notion that every performance of sexuality – including those that come represent sites of resistance – is contingent and constructed. Moreover, as readers we are warned to beware of those who profess themselves to be sexual liberators. The hotelier, Monsieur Rougeur, is here shown to be a forger, self-proclaimed child molester and rampant confabulator. Indeed, though Himmelgarten appears as a place of free sexuality, the acting out of fantasy is underpinned by a hidden system of economic exchange: ‘For staff, I hired prostitutes. Everyone could act how people do in fictions. In romances’ (Moore and Gebbie 2009, 23.5). While this is emphatically not an indictment of sex work, it reminds us that every act of consensual sex involves a complex negotiation in which power is omnipresent.

While *Lost Girls* aims at ‘a new approach to pornography and a better world’ (Moore and Gebbie 2012), it steers clear of utopian fantasies. Unartistic pornography may be symptomatic of a sexually repressive culture (Moore 2009), but it would then be absurd to think that a less restricted approach to sexual expression would result in a pornography that abides by some universal code of sexual norms or ideals. Several chapters directly thematise the relationship between art and life, as when Monsieur Rougeur, whilst being anally penetrated by Alice, exclaims, ‘Our life sometimes becomes ... ohhhh ... like our *pornography*’ (Moore and Gebbie 2009, 23.4). This statement raises complex questions about the relationship between fantasy and the real world for it is uttered by Rougeur in response to Dorothy’s accusation that the tale of him selling his own body and that of two children, whom he himself sexually exploits, is a fiction driven by desire: ‘I bet you’re makin’ this *up!* You got that big ol’ thing in your ass, so you’re talkin’ dirty’ (Moore and Gebbie 2009, 23.4). In view of Moore and Gebbie’s own battles with censorship and in the context of *Lost Girls* as a whole, Rougeur is at his most convincing when he defends the distinction between fantasy and reality: ‘Fiction and fact: only madmen and magistrates cannot discriminate between them’; however, here the narrative and meta-narrative levels of the text pull in opposite directions for Rougeur proceeds to assert his own factuality (and hence

culpability): ‘I, of course, am *real*, and since Helena, who I just fucked is only thirteen, I am very *guilty*’ (Moore and Gebbie 2009, 22.4).

Fantasy in *Lost Girls* plays an important role in the psychological health of individuals and the societies to which they belong. Once the mirror of love is broken, fantasies of political domination usurp sexual fantasy and the horrors of World War I invade the story world. This perversion of desire, which carries ecological as well as psychological consequences, is brutally represented in the final two pages of the book. The penultimate page zooms in on a landscape desolated by war and its final panel provides an ambiguous image of a young man’s face, which bears a glazed and (possibly) post-orgasmic expression (see Figure 7.4). On turning the page, however, it becomes clear that the man is dead – disemboweled and castrated – such that the entropic dissolution of Thanatos replaces the creative ecstasy of Eros which underpins the majority of *Lost Girls* (see Figure 7.5). The confessions of Monsieur Rougeur are, if true, clearly reprehensible, and the actions of other sexual exploiters in the text, such as Hook, seriously problematise the presentation of the work as a piece of pornography; however, this unnamed soldier is clearly worse off than Peter, who survives Hook’s assaults both physically and emotionally, or Alice, who survives and ultimately overcomes a series of abusive experiences. *Lost Girls* thus accords with Moore’s subsequent comments on the representation of violence, sexual and otherwise, in works of fiction:

in the real world, which the great majority of people are compelled to live in, there are relatively few murders in relation to the staggering number of rapes and other crimes of sexual or gender-related violence, this being almost a complete reversal of the way that the world is represented in its movies, television shows, literature or comic-book material .... Why should murder be so over-represented in our popular fiction, and crimes of a sexual nature so under-represented? Surely it cannot be because rape is worse than murder, and is thus deserving of a special unmentionable status ... Certainly, the actual victims of rape that I’ve known and spoken to don’t seem impressed with the idea of a ‘fate worse than death’.

(Moore 2014)

While it includes numerous scenes of sexual violence, *Lost Girls* depicts only three murders, all of which are linked to political – and, specifically, imperial – violence: the soldier, as well as the Archduke Ferdinand and Duchess von Hohenberg, whose assassinations in chapter 20 are handled with considerable restraint. In addition to working toward a more proportional representation of non-sexual to sexual violence, linking murder to ideology adds an additional layer of reflexivity for both writer and artist posit a direct link between the repression of sexual fantasy and the increase of actual violence within a culture (Moore and Gebbie 2012). Similar attitudes to the representation of

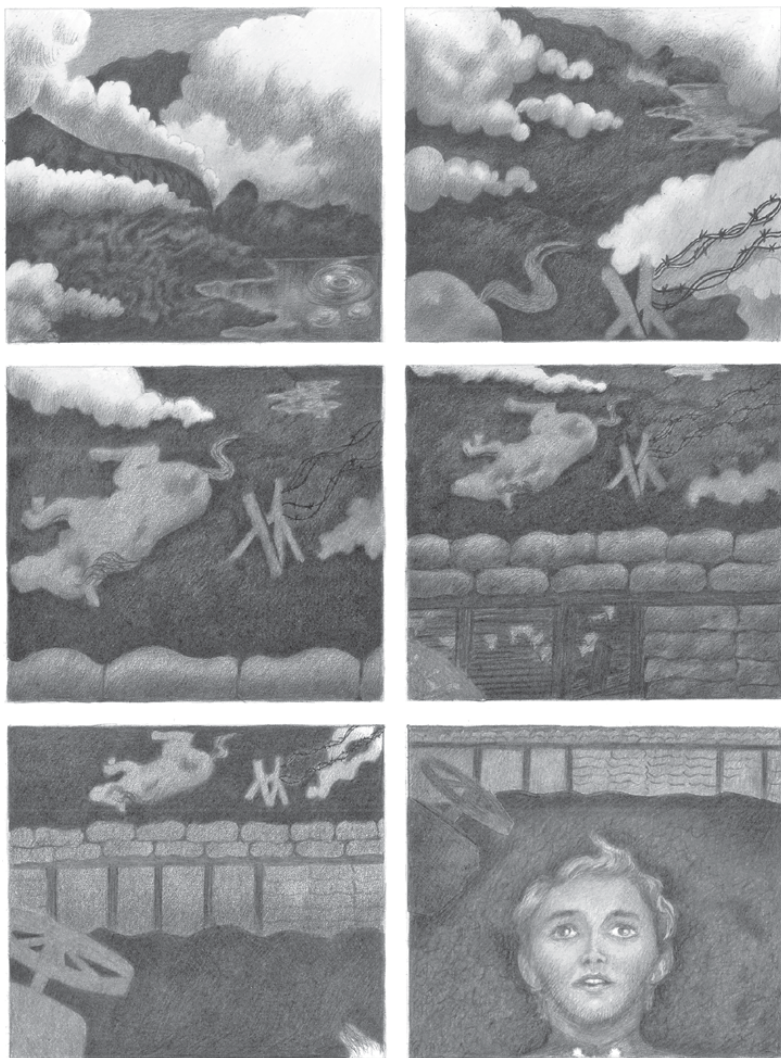
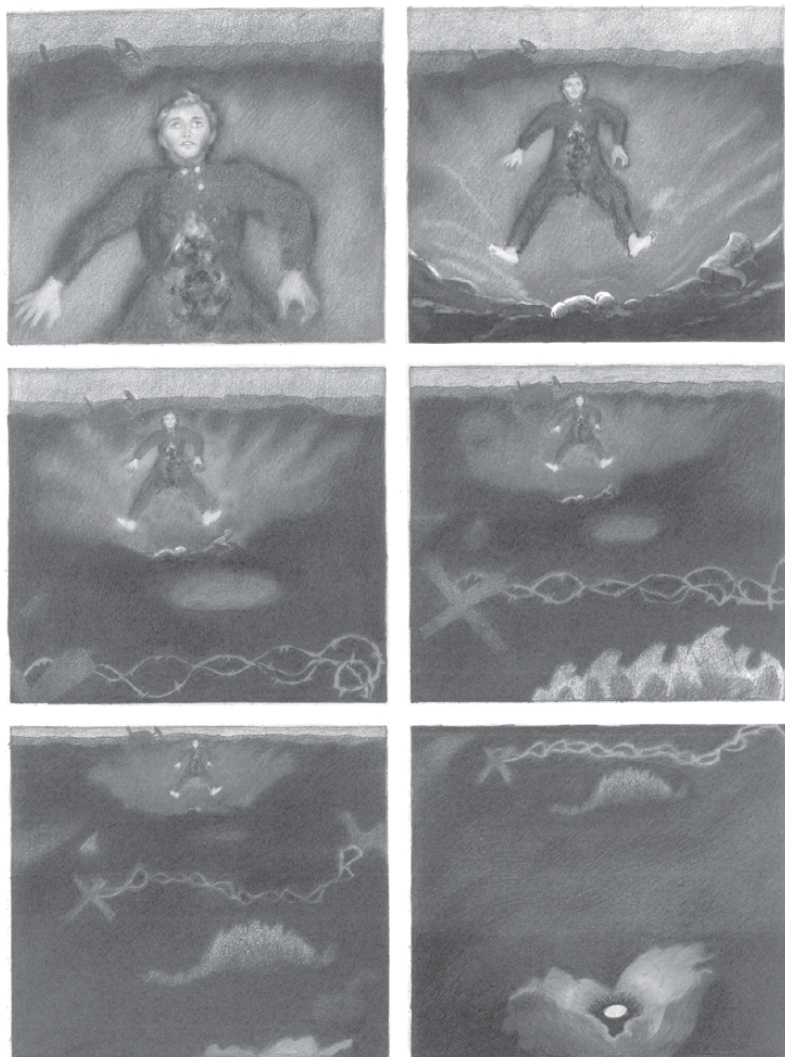


Figure 7.4 Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie, *Lost Girls*, Chapter 30, page 7. © 2006 and 2009 Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie.

fantasy violence – both sexual and non-sexual – are evident in Moore’s earlier three-part essay on sexism in comics:

how many times have you opened a copy of *Savage Sword of Conan* to find some barbarian forcing a lithe Kothian dancing girl back into the hay, ignoring her feeble half-hearted complaints and taking his cue from



End of Book Three

Figure 7.5 Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie, *Lost Girls*, Chapter 30, page 8. © 2006 and 2009 Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie.

the delirious ecstatic look that the artist has drawn onto her face, showing you that she doesn't mind *really* ...

The message of this sort of story is that women enjoy rape and that they say 'No' when they mean 'yes'. When one reads in the papers about some of the astonishing proclamations made by judges presiding over rape



cases, one wonders if our entire judicial authorities [sic] were not given copies of 'Conan the Rapist' to read during their formative years. The other message contained in this material is that *real* men are good at drinking, reducing people to dog-food with their broadswords and interfering with tavern wenches.

(Moore 1983, 19–20)

Appearing in *The Daredevils* from April to June of 1983, 'Invisible Girls and Phantom Ladies' shows Moore ruminating on the real-world effects of representations of sex and violence in works of fantasy several months before he began writing for *Swamp Thing*. Notably, Moore identifies fantasies which fetishise non-sexual violence and censor sexual violence as irresponsible in terms that anticipate his own use of fantasy to raise the consciousness of his audience.

In this emphasis on altering the consciousness of its readers, we see the impact of an underground ethos on Moore's work. Moore identifies art as a vector for remaking the world, which he defines as 'not just the physical structures but the mental and ideological structures that we've erected' (Moore 2006). Such apocalyptic visions are, moreover, linked to the ingestion of psychoactive drugs in a tradition stretching back to Aldous Huxley's attempted use of mescaline to gain admittance 'into the kind of inner world described by [William] Blake' (2004, 5), another of Moore's acknowledged precursors. Thus, the magical realism of 'Snicker-Snack' is linked to the protagonists' use of opium such that the combination of drugs and sex drastically expands what Aldous Huxley described as 'the reducing valve of the brain' (Huxley 2004, 11) in *The Doors of Perception: Heaven and Hell*, a book given a cameo appearance in *Swamp Thing* issue 35 (Moore, Woch and Randall 1985, 22). 'Snicker-Snack' represents the climax of the characters' sexual liberation precisely because, within each of the heroines, what Huxley calls the 'measly trickle of consciousness' (Huxley 2004, 11) is transformed into an imaginative torrent that transforms perception and fosters a sense of interconnection: 'When we came, our spend was Africa, was cannibals, was zebra panic thundering down the pubic veldt' (Moore and Gebbie 2009, 20.5).

Though reference to African cannibalism is not unproblematic, here the image acquires a positive association as part of a more general – and importantly imaginary – transgression against cultural taboos. This embrace of abjection, which includes the confusion of the human and the animal, has direct antecedents in *Swamp Thing* where the expansion of consciousness is linked to the ingestion of a psychoactive organic compound, an act which symbolises a transgression against the moral codes governing sexual behaviour. Initially, *Swamp Thing* tells Abigail that a kiss 'would be ... unpleasant for you' because 'we are so ... different' (Moore, Bissette and Totleben 1985c, 7). When the opposite turns out to be the case, he plucks a tuber from his own body for her to eat and this substance initiates Abigail's psychedelic

experience. The act of consuming part of one's lover relates to powerful cultural taboos which, in sexual acts involving orality, are operative in activities ranging from fellatio and cunnilingus to the actual consumption of bodily secretions or excretions. The dialogue between Abigail and Swamp Thing charts this movement from revulsion in the face of abjection to the intimacy of mutual consent:

AC: The first time ... the first time I thought about somebody *eating* part of you, I ...

Well, I threw up.

But ... if this is like, something that you *want* me to do ...

ST: It is ...

AC: Well, okay.

(Moore, Bissette and Tottleben 1985b, 12)

Beyond aligning an ecologically attuned expanded consciousness with shamanic ritual and sexual exploration, the carnal relations of Swamp Thing and Abigail are thus used to challenge the moral and legal codes that regulate amorous practices in relation to bodily difference.

Swamp Thing's initial misgivings acquire an added resonance in the context of a Gothic tradition that reads the monster as racial other; however, it is the issue of LGBTQ rights that becomes linked most directly to the sexualised relationship between the human and natural worlds. Swamp Thing's lack of male mammalian sexual organs precludes heterosexual genital relations, but this absence facilitates rather than prevents more creative physical and psychological interpenetrations. Ingesting the tuber not only allows Abigail to take a part of Swamp Thing inside of her body, but 'Rite of Spring' and subsequent issues make it clear that both beings experience their passion physically as well as psychically. Numerous panels show them kissing and cuddling, before, during and after their sexual activities, while the postures they adopt as well as their dialogue clearly reference depictions of more conventional erotica depicting human couples. 'You know I haven't eaten since breakfast', Abigail states suggestively in 'The Parliament of Trees', bringing one of his tubers to her lips while another arcs up from between his legs (Moore, Woch and Randall 1986, 5). In the next panel, Swamp Thing gives his wholehearted consent – 'Please ... be my guest' – pushing her head down on to the rhizome in her hands, which by this point is secreting considerable amounts of fluid. Nevertheless, while the phallus is heavily implied throughout this scene, the images make it clear that it remains symbolic rather than literal as the tuber Abigail ingests is clearly taken from Swamp Thing's chest.

The opening pages of 'Parliament', meanwhile, self-consciously play with readerly expectations about sexual images in print publications, pushing the boundaries of what, in 1986, would have been considered acceptable in a mainstream comic, even one publishing outside of the Comics Code. This

is directly thematised in the frame narrative for this issue, told through the pictures and commentary of a paparazzo who is trying to sell a photoset of the lovers, taken in secret, to the *Houma Daily Courier*. The first panel depicts the photographer setting up his pitch with the next 12 panels – depicting the opening of a sexual encounter – presented as two contact sheets. In addition to calling attention to the status of these images as images (and indeed as made images by virtue of the fact that the contact sheets are presented as being hung up to dry), this framing device strongly suggests the making of a soft-core magazine. In what follows, Moore and artists Stan Woch and Ron Randall, present very explicit sex scenes but, because this intimacy exists beyond dominant frames of cultural reference, it remains unrecognisable as pornographic or legally obscene outside of the storyworld. The rigidity of regulatory frameworks in determining what does and does not count as sex is exemplified in Matthew Candelaria's insistence that their intercourse 'is *not* sexual as human beings generally consider sex' (2012, loc. 460). Crucially, Candelaria's objection does not derive from the fact that Swamp Thing is not human, but rather from a reduction of sexuality to penile penetration of a vagina. 'With Swamp Thing's almost limitless physical variability,' Candelaria observes, 'fulfilling sexual contact seems not only possible, but easy to achieve', further noting that 'it is clear that there is no sexual activity, no physical penetration' (loc. 465).

That a highly educated writer can make such claims in a peer-reviewed academic publication in 2012 speaks to the persistence of heteronormativity throughout western culture. The irony here is augmented by the fact that Moore explicitly links the subsequent persecution of Abigail to the sort of state-sponsored homophobia he later combats in *AARGH!* Issue 48 sees Abigail arrested as a sex offender following the photos' publication, while in issue 51 we learn that she has been charged with 'Crimes Against Nature', which her attorney describes as 'those laws ... usually reserved for people who have carnal relationships with farm animals' (Moore, Veitch and Alcala 1986a, 4). In Louisiana, where the series is set, this would be RS 14:89, a state law which criminalises homosexuality and which as recently as 2013 led to the arrest of a 65-year-old man for agreeing to have sex, in private, with a male, undercover police officer (Mustian 2013). That Moore had such laws in his sights 20 years earlier speaks to his longstanding commitment to LGBTQ rights, but his critique goes one step further. Though issue 50 (July 1986) definitively concludes the supernatural level of the *Crisis* narrative (the main crossover issue was issue 46), the American Gothic arc does not conclude until issue 53, 'The Garden of Earthly Delights', in which Abigail is freed and the genre shifts from fantasy horror to sci-fi. This issue and the preceding one, 'Natural Consequences', tie together the three strands that connect the arc as a whole: sexuality, ecology and anarchism. Having jumped bail, Abigail ends up in Gotham, where she is arrested and held pending her return to Louisiana. In order to free her, Swamp Thing holds the city to ransom, transforming it into a jungle landscape reminiscent of



the apocalyptic scenes from J.G. Ballard's *Unlimited Dream Company* (1979). Batman, meanwhile, is positioned as an agent of a repressive state enforcing the criminalisation of non-heteronormative sexuality and as an opponent of the natural world itself, deploying technology evocative of agent orange and clear-cut logging (Moore and Totleben 1986, 12–15). Swamp Thing's spectacular triumph over Batman thus becomes equated with the apocalyptic power of the natural world: 'though man might boast of having conquered nature that's not the case, for if nature were to shrug or to merely raise its eyebrow then we should all be gone' (Moore 1987). Significantly, along with this natural revolution comes a social revolution in which law enforcement breaks down, as police officers ingest Swamp Thing's psychoactive tubers (Moore and Totleben 1986, 6), and the bounds of sexuality begin to relax, 'By dusk ... the first few converts remove their clothes and go naked amongst the hanging gardens of Gotham' (Moore, Veitch and Alcala 1986b, 20).

By the final issue of Moore's run on the series, however, Swamp Thing has become powerful enough to institute a global utopia, yet he has also learned to divorce his use of power from his personal interests. He has become a veritable god, who could 'restore Africa's crumbling topsoil', 'rebuild the forests ... of the Amazon', 'drop grapes ... into the mouths ... of all the hungry children ... turn the Gobi and Sahara ... into green and rippling meadows' (Moore, Bissette, Yeats, Veitch and Alcala 1987, 8). But, in a break with comic-book conventions, he decides to go home instead, concluding that 'mankind must stand or fall ... by its merits alone' (Moore, Bissette, Yeats, Veitch and Alcala 1987, 17). In having Abigail and the Swamp Thing withdraw from the public world into a private space – a living mansion constructed of swamp flora – that the reader only ever encounters from the outside, this issue validates the sort of emotional and sexual intimacy largely excluded from mainstream comics of the time. The peculiar representation of hypermasculine heroes such as Superman, for whom sexuality and domesticity represent dangerous divergences from their commitment to saving the world, is here replaced by an ecological and anarchist sensibility in which everyday human beings must assume responsibility for the fate of the planet. Visually, this point is conveyed in the last three panels that include Abby and the Swamp Thing (Moore, Bissette, Yeats, Veitch and Alcala 1987, 22), for these depict the lovers departing into the misty distance from a vantage point located behind two human characters, Chester and Liz, who will take charge of Abigail's environmental group.

This ending might appear to privilege individual happiness over collective good and to eschew politics in favour of romance. Indeed, on seeing her new home, which Stephen Bissette renders in decidedly Lovecraftian dimensions, Abigail observes, 'It's just like a fairy tale or something', and Swamp Thing refers to the structure as a 'castle' and describes her as 'a Hans Andersen Princess' (Moore, Bissette, Yeats, Veitch and Alcala 1987, 19). But such knowing allusiveness alerts us to the political intent behind this ostensibly

romantic fantasy. The accordance of a fairy-tale ending to a couple who have overtly flouted the rules about who may love whom and in what ways stands as a political act in its own right; moreover, in refusing to have Swamp Thing emerge as a monstrous god out of the machine to magically solve the ecological crisis, Moore demonstrates a fidelity to his anarchist principles. This ending dissolves the dreams propagated by religious or technological messianism (it is worth recalling that Swamp Thing himself exists as a byproduct of the US military-industrial complex); further, it advances an educational programme of the sort that Moore subsequently identifies as a necessary precursor to freedom:

Ultimately, anarchy begins at home. Life without rulers ... will entail self-rule, which cannot come about unless we properly accept and understand that we as individuals ... are totally responsible for our own lives and destinies.

(Moore 2010, 4)

Here too the intersection of the public and private undermines the gendering of space while the emphasis on educating 'a large majority of people... to a point where they [are] able to direct their own lives without interfering in the lives of others' clarifies the political function of fantasy in both *Swamp Thing* and *Lost Girls* (Moore 2010, 5).

Whereas social ecology is built on a series of historical analyses aimed at identifying the roots of the present and the parameters of the possible (Bookchin 2005, 134), Moore's use of fantasy performs a similar task, inviting us as readers to actively destroy and refashion the worlds we inhabit. But for Moore fantasy, like drugs, is best used not for escapism but rather as a means to a practical end. Pleasure – and sexual pleasure especially – remains an awfully important aspect of the reading experience, but if we remain unable to translate our readerly activities into performances that go beyond the page, we will have missed the point. This does not of course preclude laughter or having fun, as is made clear in the aptly titled, 'I Read the News Today, Oh Shit ...', an editorial Moore published the month after the UK's 2010 national election:

Picture yourself in a boat on a river, only it's not a river so much as a riptide of burning mermaid tears that won't stop screaming, and it isn't really a boat, it's actually a whale-vulva made out of diamonds. And by 'picture yourself' I mean 'picture a kind of schizophrenic jukebox that's either playing all the records backwards or is somehow spraying them across the room like hurtling black vinyl coasters of sizzling death.' Welcome to the psychedelic summer spectacular fourth issue of *Dodgem Logic*. We'd love to turn you on.

(Moore 2010, 1)

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## 8 Playing past the ‘straight male gamer’

### From modding Edwin(a) to bisexual Zevran in BioWare games

*Steven Holmes*

#### Introduction

BioWare, a Canadian video game developer, has become one of the most visible game companies to represent lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) themes in computer role-playing games (CRPGs).<sup>1</sup> Although the vast majority of BioWare games are critically acclaimed, and some have been groundbreaking in their visual representation of intimacy for LGBT characters, BioWare has had a turbulent relationship with the public sphere, in television news depictions of its games, and in micro-publics such as its own internet forums. This chapter shows how BioWare’s representation of LGBT themes developed, from the *Baldur’s Gate* (BioWare 1998) franchise where LGBT themes, particularly transsexual themes, were treated primarily as comic relief, to the current standard in the *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007, 2010, 2012) and *Dragon Age* (BioWare 2009, 2011, 2014) franchises, where players can develop intimate relationships with sympathetic bisexual or queer characters. I build on the work of Michael Warner (2002) to suggest that the fan and modding reaction to a game from BioWare’s early career, *Baldur’s Gate II: Shadows of Amn* (BioWare 2000), can be understood as a form of counterpublic. Warner defines counterpublics as publics that exist in opposition to larger publics, a sort of politically infused subculture. ‘Mods’ are modifications of games that alter the code that negotiates the rules of the game. Modding communities develop around fans, programmers, and artists, and are comparable to other fan communities. The presentation of Ferelden in *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009), as a world in which non-heteronormative sexuality and intimacy is banal, has transformed BioWare’s brand so that the inclusion of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (but not transsexual) relationships have become the status quo of the company’s games.

BioWare claims on its website that its goal is to ‘create, deliver, and evolve the most emotionally engaging games in the world’ (BioWare 2014). They hope to achieve this goal by delivering ‘the best story-driven games in the world’ and by building ‘a trusted brand through products, events, and community’ (BioWare 2014). BioWare’s story-driven games revolve around the interaction of the player’s character and computer-controlled characters. This interaction predominantly takes place in the form of simulated dialogue, where the player

selects from a range of speech options for their character to perform, to which other characters in the game respond. Over the course of the game, the player recruits allies that then can be controlled by the player in tactical situations, but not in social situations. These characters form the player's 'party'. BioWare develops worlds where the pacing of combat, action, and dialogue interaction is up to the player. When players are not in combat, they participate in a myriad of downtime activities, including trading, resting, and conversing with their party. In more recent games, dialogue with party members<sup>2</sup> has become increasingly elaborate. In most BioWare games since *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare 1998), the interaction between the player's character and party members presents capacities for simulated sexual interactions, 'romances', between the player character and the party members. Although from the developer's standpoint romance subplots are secondary priorities in the game (Gaider 2014c), they nonetheless have become a focal point for many players of BioWare games, if the number of controversies surrounding them is any indication.

Several computer game companies are inclined to manifest an active presence on the internet, often with elaborate websites that serve to advertise upcoming releases, to sell existing products, and to manage technical issues with the community. This is indicative of what Henry Jenkins has termed 'Convergence Culture', wherein the circulation of media content across different media systems 'depends heavily on consumers' active participation' (Jenkins 2006, 3). BioWare is not an exception to this trend. Many BioWare games come bundled with support packages that allow the creation of new content using their game engine (the program that underlies interaction in the digital environment). BioWare further encourages players to share their fan-created content online, making BioWare a paragon of participatory media consumption.

Unlike most computer game companies, which tend to hire liaisons between the fanbase and the developers and eschew any active or consistent presence from the developers themselves, BioWare's forums have sometimes included responses from key writers in their development staff. For instance, in March 2011, when an anonymous player<sup>3</sup> argued that BioWare had neglected its core demographic, the 'Straight Male Gamer', lead writer on *Dragon Age: Origins* David Gaider responded with a six-paragraph response, arguing in part that 'The romances in the game are not for "the straight male gamer." They're for everyone. We have a lot of fans, many of whom are neither straight nor male, and they deserve no less attention' (Pearce 2011).<sup>4</sup>

If computer game companies' forums are, as Henry Jenkins argues in regard to contemporary transmedial projects, part of 'the desire to intensify audience loyalty and increase engagement by recognizing and rewarding the most fully committed viewers' (Jenkins 2014, 245) then where does the necessity of defending aesthetic decisions in computer games come in? Current theories about the trajectory of participatory culture need to further explore the relationship of aesthetic producers with the emergence of digital cultures which, rather than being seamless reflections of corporate loyalty, are increasingly hostile to the culture industry which produces them.

This example does not fit neatly into either of the two most popular metaphors used to conceptualize digital public spaces. Since the mid-1990s, some critics have posited the internet as a virtual public sphere, where the Habermasian ideal of rational-critical debate could conceivably take place (Papachrissi 2002). Habermas imagined rational-critical debate as a way for people to rework the laws that governed their public lives, to assert agency over their own lives. Although the optimism surrounding the internet faded as soon as the beginning of the 2000s, the conversation on the relationship between the internet and the public sphere has not abated. As early as 2001, Lincoln Dahlberg recognized that 'the expansion of the public sphere through the Internet requires not only developing deliberative spaces but also attracting participation from citizens who have been socialized within a commercialized and individualized culture hostile towards public deliberation' (Dahlberg 2001, 615). Zizi Papachrissi recognized that, although the retrieval capabilities of the internet could infuse political discussion with otherwise inaccessible information, it nonetheless could 'frequently fragmentize political discourse' and that there was no guarantee it would transcend to Habermas's idyllic notion of a public sphere (Papacharissi 2002, 9). Critical assessments on the capacity of the internet to serve as a venue for rational-critical debate have varied between being muted in their optimism (Papachrissi) to much more pessimistic (Brundidge 2010; Gerhards and Schafer 2010).

A second popular metaphor for the internet and internet forums is that of cyber-balkanization. Instead of increasing the capacity for rational and critical debate among equals, the internet may instead 'lead to more fragmented intellectual and social interaction' (Alstye and Brynjolfsson 2005, 851). Tim Maurer and Robert Morgus have argued that 'balkanization' can be a misleading term, however, since the term can either mean 'a move toward freedom from oppression' or 'a reminder of centuries of bloody struggle to hold together a region that ultimately ended in violent fragmentation' (Maurer and Morgus 2014) and suggest using the term 'fragmentation' instead. It is possible that it is the pejorative elements of 'balkanization' that have made it a popular metaphor, but Maurer and Morgus are right that no single analogy can explain the interaction between corporate micro-publics and counterpublics that disrupt any notion of a singular public sphere on the internet today.

Michael Warner defines a counterpublic as a public defined by its tension with a larger public (Warner 2002, 56). His chief example is that of the sexual culture of gay men and lesbians. Queer critique of gaming is a growing field. For instance, I first became aware of David Gaider's response to the 'Straight Male Gamer' because it was circulated not by BioWare, but by queer activists and queer game activists, such as those at [nomorelost.org](http://nomorelost.org) (Pearce 2011) and [geekfeminism.org](http://geekfeminism.org) (terriko 2011), each of which recirculated Gaider's response, celebrating BioWare's representation of queer identity in its games. Positive representations of queer identity have become a central arena through which queer activists attempt to transform the rules, attitudes, and behaviors of the larger public. While transmedia activity in the domain of cultural capitalism



may generally seek to intensify audience loyalty, this assessment would ignore the reality that ‘the audience’ is a constellation of different audiences, each of which approach cultural texts with a wide range of expectations and priorities. One of the ways that queer counterpublics may manifest themselves may be in the form of the modding community that surrounds gaming franchises.

### **Modding Edwin(a): *Baldur’s Gate*, *Neverwinter Nights*, and queer counterpublics’ intersection with feminist modding culture**

BioWare’s first game was *Shattered Steel* (BioWare 1996), but the direction of the company was more firmly established with their release of *Baldur’s Gate*. *Baldur’s Gate* is a real-time action fantasy RPG with heavy text-based dialogue trees and lengthy plot. The entire *Baldur’s Gate* series, including *Baldur’s Gate*, *Baldur’s Gate: Tales of the Sword Coast* (BioWare 1999), *Baldur’s Gate II: Shadows of Amn*, and *Baldur’s Gate II: Throne of Bhaal* (BioWare 2001) have combined sold over five million copies (Plunkett 2009, 210). The player interacts with the game through a mixture of image and menu; the player controls a character that they view isometrically (from a bird’s-eye view onto a two-dimensional space). Each game is narratively driven and explicitly literary in form, including chapter headings, and broken up by occasional cut-scenes of diegetic material. Each game has discernible characters and extensive text that frames and contextualizes the relationship of the player’s character and the diegetic world. Within each iteration of the *Baldur’s Gate* franchise, the player explores the *Forgotten Realms*<sup>5</sup> setting, slaying monsters, disarming traps, and learning more both about the world and the player’s own character.

In BioWare RPGs, the player can select among a range of party members; in *Baldur’s Gate* the player is limited to six total party members, which includes the player’s character. There are twenty-five potential party members in *Baldur’s Gate*, which means that there is high competition for the five available spots in the player’s party. Players recruit party members incrementally over the course of the game, and as such their decision to recruit one party member may be contingent on a wide variety of factors, such as their emotional investment in the character, their estimation of the character’s ability to combat traps and monsters, the convenience of accessing the party member, the relation of the character to other potential party members, the relationship of the ‘alignment’ of the player’s character and the potential party member, or happenstance. Alignment in the rules of *Dungeons & Dragons* denotes a snapshot of the character’s ethical outlook and disposition. It operates along two axes, ‘Good and Evil’ and ‘Lawful and Chaotic’.

The range of conflicts that occur in party formation can be shown through the example of Edwin Odesseiron. When the player encounters Edwin in *Baldur’s Gate*, he asks the player to help kill another potential party member, the witch Dynaheir. Edwin is represented as Lawful Evil, which means that he obeys the rules of some hierarchical formations, but whose motivation for

violence may be primarily driven by greed or lust for power. Even if the player decides to follow a scheme of being good-aligned, there may be an appeal in recruiting Edwin, as he is one of the most powerful wizards in the game (his Intelligence score is 18, the highest possible). Edwin also talks to himself, which some players may interpret as humorous, but can also reflect his egotistical nature, which some players may find abrasive. As such, the decision to recruit Edwin in the game is contingent on established relationships (Has the player already decided to ally with Dynaheir; the lawful good magical character?), alignment (Is the player good or evil?), strategy (Does the player need a powerful wizard in their party?), and emotional investment (Does the player find Edwin funny or abrasive?). *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* is a continuation of *Baldur's Gate*: the player can persist with the same character they played in the previous game, and several of the party members persist between the two iterations. Edwin is one such character.

One of the most dramatic changes between *Baldur's Gate* and *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* is the development of romantic subplots between the player character and party members. Edwin, however, does not have a romantic subplot. The romance subplots in *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* were simultaneously lauded for their innovation while critiqued for many ideological and arbitrary limits: for instance, they were only available if the player was a human, elf, or half-elf, while the game on the whole allowed the player to choose additionally among dwarf, gnome, halfling, and half-orc. All romances were heteronormative: if the player-character was male, three female party members could be romanced, whereas if the player-character was female, only one male party member could be romanced.

Since its release in 2000, *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* has developed a fan-based modding community. For CRPGs, mods can range from the addition of individual items, to individual characters, and even entire scenarios. For narrative-driven games such as those by BioWare, mods that add characters or scenarios, function in a comparable fashion to fan-fiction. Mods, once included into a game's code, can be indistinguishable from the diegetic world originally developed by BioWare. Like fan-fiction, mods tend to congregate around websites that organize modified material and serve as a nexus of distribution. One such website, focused on fantasy role-playing games, is Spellhold Studios. Spellhold Studios is not the only website devoted to mods for the Infinity Engine (the system that runs *Baldur's Gate* and *Baldur's Gate II*). Nonetheless, it is preferable to other sites as a representative sample of the computer RPG character-based modding community because it provides consistent meta-data (textual description of what is in the mod, what the mod is about, and whether players can engage in romantic activity with the party member). As of this writing, Spellhold Studios hosts seventeen 'character mods' for *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* and twelve 'expansion mods'. Character mods add one new potential party member to the game for potential recruitment, whereas expansion mods add new areas, items, and enemies, but can also alter existing party members.

Of the seventeen character mods for *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* at Spellhold Studios, six are female and eleven are male. Eight are not coded for any sort of 'romance', and nine are coded to engage in 'romance'. A 'romance' here connotes a relationship that goes at beyond simply flirting, although this sexuality is only implied through text in the game. Of the mods with romance, just over half (five) are heterosexual, with two male and three female characters. The remaining four characters include two bisexual males,<sup>6</sup> one lesbian, and one gay character. The high ratio of mods-with-romances to mods-without-romances suggests that romance is a high priority for many modders, and nearly one-to-one ratio of heteronormative to queer, lesbian, and bisexual characters suggests that modders had a strong interest in exploring non-heteronormative sexuality in the context of fantasy role-playing games.

The expansion mods also reflect the interests of players to explore the options of female player characters engaging in romance with male characters; the Haer'Dalis and Sarevok mods expand the dialogue options with prominent male characters already in the game. Likewise, there are four mods that expand the 'friendship' dialogue of four other characters, allowing meaningful, but non-sexual relationships to emerge among an array of characters. Finally, there is the 'Edwin Romance' expansion mod, which in principle is comparable to the other romantically themed expansion mods; however, due to events surrounding Edwin in *Baldur's Gate II*, this particular mod bears further examination. To make sense of this mod, I first need to introduce how magic works in *Dungeons & Dragons*.

*Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974) utilizes a wide variety of types of magic: spells may explode in a flash, or have profound, lingering effects. Magic can transform people's bodies or shape minds. Magic may be enchanted on to items and take on permanent qualities. Both *Baldur's Gate* and *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* include a range of instances where magic may, for instance, change a character's sex. In *Baldur's Gate*, one cursed magic item is called the 'Girdle of Masculinity/Femininity', which reverses a character's sex in the game, replacing a male avatar with a female one. Cursed magic items cannot be unequipped, but must be removed through a 'remove curse' spell. The cursed quality of the item adds a pejorative subtext to the subject of transsexuality. To BioWare's credit, however, the item was a part of the *Dungeons & Dragons* setting, having been added to the game in 1979 (Gygax and Arneson 1977–9).

The appearance of magical sex change in BioWare's early titles such as the *Baldur's Gate* series reifies a conception of static gender identity that is asymmetric with sexual characteristics. This is the case for Edwin in *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*. Edwin's lust for greater power leads him to seek out a 'Nether Scroll', which he hopes will push him toward immortality. After Edwin discovers the Nether Scroll, he uses it despite not fully understanding the magic involved. This results in Edwin being transformed into a woman – Edwina. The transformation changes the character avatar and even the voice actor: Edwin, who is voiced by Jim Meskimen, is replaced once the

transformation is complete by Tress MacNeille. The first PC dialogue option after the transformation is to comment, 'And by the way, nice rack.' This is the 'nice' option. The more extreme is: 'If you're a woman, you've no place amongst us.'

Ian Bogost suggests games can work rhetorically in how they enact procedures around diegetic worlds. Two rhetorical actions he identifies are empathy and habituation. Bogost argues that games that are designed to foster empathy 'would do well to invite us to step into the smaller, more uncomfortable shoes of the downtrodden rather than the larger, more well-heeled shoes of the powerful' (Bogost 2011, 19). Edwin retains his magical capacities after his transformation into Edwina; yet, despite being powerful within the rules of *Dungeons & Dragons*, he nevertheless is subject to verbal abuse by almost every party member. Edwin(a)'s plight is not designed to elicit an empathic response. Since the character remains powerful within the diegetic world of the game, the player and the player's character are inhibited from ever feeling empathy for this gender-dysphoric character.

The notion that Edwin(a) can habituate players may be a double-edged sword for queer or feminist readings of *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*. Bogost suggests that 'Cultural connections help habituate ideas. They give them form, acclimatizing listeners – or players – to the social contexts in which ideas might be used' (Bogost 2011, 132). Likewise, Barry Brummett in the *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture* argues that one of the ways that popular culture can act rhetorically is in the context of the quotidian: 'the public and personal meanings that affect everyday, even minute-to-minute decisions' (Brummett 1991, 41). What would be the most significant here would be the personalization, characterization, and interaction with characters and the player's understanding of how the game world represents sexuality in everyday mannerisms. The most compelling rhetorical force of Edwina in *Baldur's Gate II* might not be any individual piece of dialogue, but rather the banality of having Edwina in the party and resuming to the normal process of killing monsters and exploring the world. Edwin(a)'s magical abilities are the same regardless of his/her sex. Those instances where Edwina speaks back against the male objectification of her body, in being integrated into the processes of the game and thus repeated in each play-through of the game, can likewise suggest that the rejection of objectification can be normalized. For instance, Yoshimo offers to 'let out the seams' in Edwina's robe, since she has 'more ... bulk ... in the upper chest area.' Edwina's response is: 'Silence, you fool! Chauvinist pig! (what am I saying?) I mean to say IDIOT!' Edwina persists in Edwin's speaking habit of including audible, parenthetical remarks that characterize his/her internal thought process. Here, his/her thought process, which seems rooted in his notion of his/her identity as male, senses that the critique of Yoshimo as a 'Chauvinist pig!' is ironically at odds with Edwina's self-identity. Edwina's response here seems representative of performance theory's notion of gender. Instead of being a stable basis through which acts follow, Judith Butler argues that 'gender is an identity tenuously

constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*' (Butler 1990, 191). Edwina, in being recognized as female, feels compelled to respond to veiled misogyny through clichéd feminist rebuttals, simultaneously parodying feminism while also embodying its necessity.

The idea of 'habituation' can also be flipped on its head. Almost every party member takes a potshot at Edwina due to his/her transformation. While the idea of Edwina and her sexual dysphoria can be habituated in the player, so can the notion that the open antagonism of non-heteronormative individuals is both acceptable and even expected. Although BioWare tends to provide a range of discursive options, Edwina's particular status offers none of genuine sympathy. This could reflect a sentiment that Adrienne Shaw observed where members of the gaming industry resist including LGBT narrative elements partly because they feel '“real world” issues have no place in virtual fantasies' (Shaw 2009, 236). BioWare may have seen the Nether Scroll episode purely as comic relief and not considered the magical transformation as having any connection whatsoever to a '“real world” issue'.

The Edwin Romance mod is not predicated on a response to the transgender implications of Edwin's Nether Scroll subplot in *Baldur's Gate II*. Instead, like the majority of other character and expansion mods built around a male party member, it is primarily a way to rectify the asymmetry in male and female heterosexual options: it is designed as a heteronormative venture, where female player characters can play out a heterosexual romance with Edwin. The writer Laufey developed the Edwin Romance simultaneously with writing her fan-fiction novels *In the Cards* and *Cards Reshuffled* (Laufey 2004). If a female player character develops a relationship with Edwin prior to the transformation, then they can remain committed to each other throughout Edwin(a)'s time transformed. There is no physical intimacy indicated during this time, but Edwin and the player character retain loyalty for each other despite the transformation in their relationship from heterosexual to homosexual.

The development of modding communities transformed many of the precepts in how BioWare approached romance in its later games. The modding community grew with the release of *Neverwinter Nights* (BioWare 2002), which could come bundled with an editor for the Aurora Engine which powered the game. The role of gender in *Neverwinter Nights* has been explored by Torill Mortensen, who focuses on an assertion during the game's character creation process where the player designs their avatar: 'The choice of making your character Male or Female is purely an aesthetic one, as both are equally capable. In *Neverwinter Nights*, gender has no bearing on the ways in which skills or abilities are applied.' Mortensen paraphrases this as the game saying that 'you're told gender means nothing' (Mortensen 2009, 134). BioWare emphasizes to the player that gender does not impact the statistical points associated with characters that govern how capable they are to accomplish any given task. She makes a similar point on the role of gender in the sequel, *Neverwinter Nights 2*: 'Race and gender determine your character's

appearance and affect many social interactions in the game' (BioWare 2006, 95). Christina Sommerfeldt clarifies the relationship here, arguing that 'the character-creation system in RPGs both insists on and wants to erase gender difference in its use of avatars, character portraits, and what the in-game blurbs call "aesthetics"' (Sommerfeldt 2005, 163).

Modding communities go beyond corporate ploys toward participatory culture to cement consumer loyalty. In 2005, three years after the release of *Neverwinter Nights*, BioWare held a contest to create stories using the toolset released with *Neverwinter Nights*. The contest entry was judged based on 'the characters, the dialogue, the plot, the non-linear structure, and the flow and pace of the story' (Carless 2005). Moreover, BioWare 'often recruited from its community, listing a number of hires that have occurred through modding of its games' (Carless 2005). The stigma that exists toward fan-fiction does not exist in the modding world: modding is not simply a mode of maintaining audience loyalty, it is an expected, necessary way of developing skills for future employees. BioWare and its modding community do not exist in isolation. Rather, there is a cyclical relationship, where the community itself inflects on future BioWare products. This is a necessary result of an industry where, instead of singular authors, teams of authors work over long periods of time on multiple projects. Based on the asymmetry in interests between the modding community and the developers in BioWare's early stages, it should not have been surprising that BioWare's approach towards romantic subplots changed drastically between the early ventures of *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter Nights* and its later ventures of *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*.

### ***Dragon Age: Origins and conditional sexuality***

Queer characters in games appeared before BioWare existed; the first example cited tends to be *Moonmist* (Cobbett 2011). Nonetheless, representations of queer characters through the 1980s and early 1990s were few and far between. More representations of queer identity in console and computer games occurred after the influx of games from Japan, such as *Chrono Trigger* (Square 1995), where an ambiguously gendered character named Flea remarks, 'Male or female, what difference does it make?' The difference between subtext and overt homosexuality in games from the 1990s is particularly pertinent in *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997), since that game offered the possibility for protagonist Cloud Strife to go on a date late in the game with his male party member Barret Wallace; this date, however, is so difficult to access that most players would likely need to follow a guide to access it. In Western CRPGs, sometimes queer themes were buried so deep in games that many players simply never discovered them, as in *Fallout 2* (Black Isle Studios 1998) where the player character could flirt with, and even marry, characters of the same sex. In 2003, BioWare introduced its first queer character: Juhani, in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare 2003). Likewise, in 2005, BioWare included two characters of conditional bisexuality, Sky<sup>7</sup> and Silk



Fox in *Jade Empire* (BioWare 2005). By conditional bisexuality, I mean that character may be latently bi-curious, but only express meaningful sexuality in regard to the PC; that is, the character's sexuality is tailored in response to the player. These examples apparently warranted little attention from mass media news outlets. Likewise, the player character, Shephard, in BioWare's *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007) could become romantically involved with Liara, regardless of Shephard's sex. This relationship pushes the boundaries of coherent sexuality, since Liara's species is Asari, and although she may resemble a woman the Asari do not distinguish between male and female. From *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* to the present day, the possibility for queer romance has grown in significance for BioWare, its brand, and its relationship with its audience.

Controversies began to emerge around BioWare's representation of sexuality in its games, not because of the orientation of its characters, but rather because of the visual representation of intimacy. When BioWare first began to explore the possibility of LGBT relationships in *Knights of the Old Republic*, they clearly were testing the waters. BioWare remained skittish about the issue for years. In *Jade Empire*, queer relationships are more difficult to access than heterosexual relationships, and there are subtle differences in how intimacy is visually represented. Heterosexual romances in that game reward the players at the end with a kiss depicted on screen. If the characters are the same sex, the camera pans away – apparently a decision that occurred after the kiss was already coded, since mods have been released that 'fix' the pan (Radish 2007).

Attention to the representation of sexuality came to a head with *Mass Effect*, for reasons which had as much to do with happenstance as design. After a conservative blogger misrepresented the level of sexuality in the game (McCullough 2013), Fox News program *The Live Desk with Martha MacCallum* manufactured a story on the game's sexual licentiousness despite the factual inaccuracy of the original assertions (Schiesel 2008). Unrelated to this, however, the possibility of a female player character (Commander Shephard) caressing the female-in-appearance alien Liara was enough to give *Mass Effect* a one-day ban in Singapore (Boyes 2007).

In *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009), romance options among party members became connected to the combat-oriented mechanics of the game. As such, players who normally might avoid the romance subplots could nonetheless be drawn to them, since party members' abilities increase in direct proportion to their 'approval score'. For instance, if Zevran has an 'approval score' of 90, then he gains 'Massive Dexterity', which increases his Dexterity rank by 6. Since Dexterity is Zevran's core attribute, directly related to the damage he deals to enemy monsters, it is in the player's interest to raise the 'approval score' of his or her party members – which simultaneously unlocks the dialogue options which initiate romance, regardless of the player's or the player's character sexual orientation. Intimacy in *Mass Effect* only could occur in the penultimate sequence of the game. In *Dragon Age: Origins* intimacy is tied to a numeric value based on the 'approval score' of the party member to



the player character. The result was a level of visibility, and accessibility, of non-heteronormative intimacy that had not yet been seen in CRPGs or, to some extent, in computer games generally.

The non-heteronormative relationships in *Dragon Age: Origins* play with the notion of sexual orientation extensively. Both of the characters that can have queer relationships with the player character, the human female Leliana and the male elf Zevran, are diegetically bisexual. Whether the player character is male or female, Zevran has slept with a range of both men and women as part of his work as an assassin, and Leliana is revealed to have had a significant relationship with her female mentor, Marjorlaine. Bisexuality is appealing from the developer's standpoint: instead of needing to animate, hire a voice actor, and code for an exclusively queer companion, they can appeal to all sexual demographics with bisexual characters while, for the most part, reusing the same graphic, voice, and code assets. There are some dialogue options that are exclusive to queer relationships, but these are few and far between: queer and heterosexual relationships with both characters are not particularly different.

If players are only interested in the representation of intimacy, they can simply eschew romantic relationships altogether. Players can access a brothel named 'The Pearl' as soon as they reach Denerim (a major city in the game). There, players can choose prostitutes, male or female, regardless of their previous actions in the game or any sense of their character's sexuality – so long as they have the money to pay. These encounters are less elaborate than the intimacy depicted in the more prolonged relationships with party members, and tend to be accompanied by a single piece of dialogue. For instance, if a male player character purchases a male elf from the brothel, then the game jumps to a brief cut-scene showing the male elf wearing underwear on a bed, with the player character standing nearby also in underwear. The male elf remarks, 'Well, usually they make you leave weapons at the door', in a euphemistic description of an implied erection on the part of the player character.

*Dragon Age: Origins* defined the horizon of expectations for critics of its future games, for better or for worse. In *Dragon Age: Origins*, rejecting one lover over another can be done more or less tactfully, in a way that does not produce significant antagonism within the party. Moreover, the bisexual quality of both non-heterosexual characters, while clearly done in part for economic reasons, was nonetheless groundbreaking simply due to the dearth of intimacy in Western CRPGs, particularly for queer representation in a mass-market medium. Of course, games that were in development simultaneously with *Dragon Age: Origins* do not fit this model; so *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare 2010) only offers heteronormative romance options. In an about-face, however, *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare 2012) was the first BioWare game to offer queer relationships without the bisexual framework.

*Dragon Age II* (BioWare 2011) modelled its relationships from *Dragon Age: Origins* in representing a range of bisexual characters. There was one difference in *Dragon Age II*, however, that opened it up to criticism from both

‘straight’ and ‘queer’ reviewers (Kuchera 2011). The loci of concern for *Dragon Age II* involved Anders, a human male party member. The relation between the mechanics of the game and controversy that followed is mapped out by Peter Kelly (2015). Whether BioWare would continue to support non-heteronormative romances in its games was open to some speculation through 2013, but it seems as though queer (and not only bisexual) romances will appear in both *Mass Effect 4* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

### Necessary feminism: participatory culture and RPGs

In researching this topic, it was not uncommon to see comments by David Gaider, whether it be in BioWare’s online digital forum, blog-based reviews and reactions to the game, and published interviews. Certainly Gaider is not the first, and will not be the last, to show an active presence in virtual communities. Nevertheless, Gaider’s comments can give some insight into how BioWare negotiates the relationship of its mediated, asymmetric micro-publics, to larger public spheres outside its control.

Gaider has worked with BioWare through *Baldur’s Gate II: Shadows of Amn*, *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, and was the lead writer on *Dragon Age: Origins*. He wrote the character of Zevran, among others (including most of the plot-centric characters such as Morrigan and Alistair), but not Leliana. He worked on *Dragon Age II*, but did not write the character of Anders. Moreover, even if Gaider wrote the characters, working in the games industry usually means that he was following the lead of a director, and working with a large team. He comments on his blog that he did not write the lesbian Juhani romance in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* and ‘I was, in fact, completely startled by the idea that, not only was this a thing that could happen, but moreso that my fellow developers – the vast majority of whom are straight men – would not only be okay with but actually *want* to include it’ (Gaider 2014a).

Gaider has been explicit in his dislike for the online forums which his company owns and operates. Writing twice on his blog, Gaider has described the ‘toxic atmosphere’ of the BioWare forums (Gaider 2014b). Gaider notes that ‘There’s a larger discussion to be had about online communities and how they should be created and monitored, and whether it’s possible for the current tenor in Internet discussion to change’ (Gaider 2014d). Even for professionals like Gaider, with several years of experience in maintaining an active online presence, the relationship between digital gaming, online communities and micro-publics, and writer/developers is not only growing, but transforming how people understand games.

The idea that Habermas’s public sphere may be realized in digital environments, then, may seem overly optimistic. For Habermas, a bourgeois public sphere was one in which ‘private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations

in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor' (Habermas 1991, 27). Unlike Habermas's conception of a public sphere, few online forums are unregulated or self-organized. Instead, they are predicated on structure and support by companies like BioWare and Electronic Arts who, following Henry Jenkins' notion of participatory culture, use them to advertise content – particularly downloadable content predicated on micro-transactions, which sometimes would not have enough of a budget to warrant independent advertising – to reify audience loyalty to the company brand, and to avoid negative player feedback by addressing bugs, glitches, and other issues. The apparent intent of online forums is to homogenize ideas, not serve as a nexus through which citizens might enact meaningful social change. Instead of becoming a new public sphere, micro-publics such as the BioWare forums seem designed to balkanize subsets of the Internet.

The transformation in BioWare games from *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*, where moments which present non-heteronormative behaviour are the subject of ridicule and can even drift into overt misogyny, to *Jade Empire*, where a homosexual kiss with Sky must be subtly censored, to *Dragon Age: Origins*, where Zevran and a male Player Character may have an openly queer relationship and it is nothing of particular concern for the players or the world – and even to *Mass Effect 3* – shows how BioWare's quotidian rhetoric has fundamentally transformed since 2000. This, of course, is in part a reflection of national shifts in the attitude towards queer identity. It still seems possible, though, that the world of Ferelden – a hardly utopian world beset by a wide range of troubles – may find queer relationships refreshingly banal, as Kelly (2015) concludes. As David Gaider observes, at the beginning of the century it was hard to imagine queer themes appearing in a game at all. Now, it is becoming difficult to imagine worlds where heteronormativity is the only option.

## Notes

- 1 Scholarly analysis of role-playing games oscillates between several different terms. Two of the more common are 'FRPGs' (fantasy role-playing games) and 'CRPGs' (computer role-playing games). Since this chapter will at times discuss both BioWare's *Mass Effect* series, and part of my argument pertains to how the *Dragon Age* franchise inflected on the *Mass Effect* franchise, I am opting for 'CRPG'. This is not to suggest that I am offering a distinction here between BioWare's 'computer RPGs' and its 'console RPGs' such as those on the Xbox and PlayStation systems.
- 2 'Party members' here are synonymous with the term 'Companions' that is used to describe characters in RPGs which begin as non-player characters (computer-controlled characters), and then are transferred to player control. In BioWare RPGs, players are cued to identify with a point-of-view character (the Player Character), but also can interact with a flexible range of allies. These allies, or Party Members, can be controlled in tactical situations such as combat, but cannot be controlled in the social aspects of the game, such as menu-based dialogue screens.
- 3 The user's forum name is 'Bastal'. The BioWare forums have been restructured since the original posting and as such most of the blogs that originally linked to the discussion are now broken. As of April 2014, this link works: <http://forum.bioware.com/topic/192281-bioware-neglected-their-core-audience-the-straight-male-gamer/>

- 4 Due to the restructuring of BioWare's forum, Gaider's original response is no longer available. However, it was reproduced in a number of blogs, such as the one by Pearce at [Nomorelost.org](http://Nomorelost.org)
- 5 *Forgotten Realms* is a narrative setting designed by Ed Greenwood, released for *Dungeons & Dragons* beginning in 1987 that was further popularized in novels by R.A. Salvatore, among others.
- 6 The meta-data for the mods indicates that the characters can be romanced by both male and female player characters but does not explicitly state that the characters are bisexual.
- 7 Sky being the first male gay character in a BioWare game. Like BioWare, Sky seems to be discovering queer identity for the first time through the game. The first time the subject is breached, Sky appropriately remarks, 'I'm not quite sure how I feel right now, but you've certainly given me something to think about. I've never met someone like you and ... that's, maybe, a place to start.' Implicitly, then, Sky has shown only a minimal queer subtext until the player broaches the subject, which may be part of the reason this possibility in the game was largely ignored in news media at the time.

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## 9 Playing with gender

### (Re-)imagining women and men in fantasy board games

*Adam Brown and Deb Waterhouse-Watson*

It is game night, and *A Touch of Evil: The Supernatural Game* (Hill 2008) is brought to the table. This highly thematic game immerses players in the hunt for a villain terrorising what the rulebook describes as the ‘small, secluded village of Shadowbrook’. Players randomly draw a hero card and related miniature with which to explore areas, accrue weapons and valuable objects, and fight the villain’s evil minions – all while various ‘mystery’ event cards remind the heroes that time is running out. Susan has randomly drawn the character of ‘Anne Marie, The School Teacher’ and wants to purchase a powerful musket, which is (according to its card) ‘the best gun that money can buy’. But Susan/Anne Marie cannot use this weapon, because one of her character abilities defines her as a ‘Lightweight’, who may not use any guns except a pistol. Susan laments her misfortune – particularly given she had the same ability (or handicap) when she drew Sally the ‘High School Sweetheart’ in Flying Frog’s zombie game *Last Night on Earth* (Hill 2007) the week before. Just her ‘luck’.

*A Touch of Evil* is somewhat reflexive, parodying cinematic stereotypes through distinctive photographic artwork, yet the gendered dimension of the representation of character and the ways in which this intersects with the game’s mechanics cannot easily be dismissed. There are certainly inconsistencies, given the varied abilities of different female characters, although it is curious that of all characters included in the game’s numerous expansions, it is only women who cannot use guns due to ‘innate’ qualities, such as being vampires or witches, while the reason that the character Brother Marcus cannot use firearms is due to pacifist pretensions. In a sense, Anne Marie’s ‘lightweight’ ability can be seen as a metaphor for how female gamers and game characters are commonly constructed in popular culture generally – not quite as capable as their male counterparts. With this in mind, this chapter engages with what has been termed the ‘cultural rhetoric’ of games (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 516) in relation to gender.

Gender characteristics and roles in contemporary board games offer important insights into the complex synergies between form and content at the heart of gaming culture; however, scholars have overwhelmingly neglected this facet of board gaming. In addition to a growing number of games



adapted from canonical fantasy texts like Fantasy Flight Games' board game adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* (Knizia 2000) and *A Game of Thrones* (Petersen 2003), an ever-expanding range of tabletop games draw on conventions, character (arche)types, and pre-existing plots from the fantasy genre. The construction of narrative(s) within game-worlds, and how gamers are positioned in relation to these, invite investigation of how femininities and masculinities are negotiated through rules, components, and mechanics.

This chapter is underpinned by a detailed content and textual analysis of the representation of female and male characters in fantasy quest board games. Our examination of *Talisman: The Magical Quest Game* (Goodenough and Harris 2008) and the German game *Legenden von Andor* (released by Kosmos in 2012, translated and published by Fantasy Flight Games as *Legends of Andor* [Menzel 2013]) reveals an ongoing tension between the reinforcement of gendered stereotypes and the need to break free from these. In their own ways, both games seem to imply an acknowledgment of past inequity and the need to expand subject positions, but overwhelmingly limit the opportunities for gamers to play with gender.

### **Gendered games, tabletop narratives, and fantasy worlds**

A considerable literature has developed around gender and gaming; however, most studies focus almost exclusively on video game(r)s (e.g. Sundén and Sveningsson 2013; Thornham 2011). Research has examined female gamer identities (Downey 2012) and critiqued the nature and impact of heavily gendered stereotypes (Dill and Thill 2007). Tabletop games lack the complex visual imagery of the immersive virtual environments of online/console/computer games, but understanding their radically different construction of narratives and gendering of characters and game-worlds is of critical importance. Existing scholarship on tabletop games has given far more attention to 'role-playing games' (Cover 2010; Mackey 2001) than to board and card games, which are also frequently reliant on character and narrative.

The recent surge in new board games – assisted by thousands of crowd-funding projects – has seen a far more complex and diverse genre develop since early board game histories were published (e.g. Bell 1960). While classic games like chess and the Monopoly-esque fare of corporate giants Hasbro and Mattel still dominate the 'mainstream', smaller companies and independent designers have brought a plethora of cardboard worlds to life. Several recent studies focus on these developments from historical, pedagogical, psychological, and design perspectives (e.g. Costikyan and Davidson 2011; Gobet, de Voogt, and Retschitzki 2004; Mayer and Harris 2010; Peterson 2012), but reflections on gender are fleeting, incidental, or nonexistent. Grounded in audience research, Stewart Woods' (2012) volume on Eurogames centres on the social aspects of gaming rather than an examination of board game textualities and ideologies; therefore, this chapter seeks to understand how issues of gender are negotiated in contemporary fantasy board games.

A common characteristic of role-playing games is the process of coming to identify with or 'as' a character in the fantasy world (Hendricks 2006, 39). Board game characters are seldom 'representations of their players' inner selves', as Nephew argues of (MMO)RPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online [Role-Playing] Games) (2006, 136), but instead rely more heavily on game components: character boards, cards, tokens, and/or miniatures. Certainly, the degree to which fantasy role-playing 'fundamentally blurs the distinctions' between person, player, and persona (Waskul 2006, 32) is likely to be less intense within a comparatively brief board game outing than through sustained RPG or online engagement, but the ideological implications are similar. Kevin Schut (2006, 101) finds that the genre of digital fantasy role-playing games has provided 'particularly effective texts for men to use in negotiating the often-contradictory ideas of respectable manliness, rugged masculinity and eternal boyhood'. While part of our analysis identifies more diversity in the masculinities depicted in certain board games, a related issue is whether there is a similar multiplicity of representations of (more frequently marginalised and eroticised) women. Given their inherently performative nature and the ability to engage board gamers in flexible (though still structured) narratives incorporating various randomised or selectable components from a 'fabula pool' (Brown and Waterhouse-Watson 2014), games of all kinds are particularly promising platforms for revising and reconfiguring gender norms.

Astrid Ensslin (2012, 6) points out that video game discourses can be discerned through the use of language by and about various stakeholders; in advertising; and the forms and nature of language within games themselves. Pivoting on the last of these possibilities, our analysis of fantasy board game textualities explores and exploits the intersection of narratology, which predominantly views games as stories, and ludology, which chiefly sees them as simulations governed by rule-based conventions. In doing so, we examine both the aesthetics of board game components and the mechanics of play. Teasing out the ongoing conflict between narratological and ludological approaches, Isamar Carrillo Masso (2011, 116) points out that many analytical tools that apply to literary and filmic narrative can be usefully 'recycled and adapted' for video games – and, by extension, board games. Examining games' passive, value-laden, and frequently problematic cultural rhetoric is vital given that, as with the upholding of dominant paradigms in other media, few are aware of this ideological baggage (McAllister 2004, 87). Nevertheless, the limitations of analysing a game's textualities must be noted, as the nature of 'play' opens up a wide range of possible game readings and uses. Also worth underlining here is that in focusing on representations of 'women' and 'men', we by no means suggest this is a comprehensive picture of potential diversity, as even when patriarchal values are effectively subverted, the male–female binary is seldom destabilised further through an acknowledgment of alternative understandings of sex and gender, such as intersex, androgyny, genderqueer, and so on.

Some examples of the othering of women – and prioritisation and idealisation of men – in fantasy board games usefully contextualise our later case studies. Notably, some games completely elide women, particularly those with strong transmedia relationships to canonical fantasy narratives from which women are (virtually) excluded. The various adaptations of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) exemplify this, with Cryptozoic's strategy board game version of the first Peter Jackson film, *An Unexpected Journey* (Knizia 2013) and WizKids' *Journey to the Lonely Mountain Strategy Game* (Lang 2013) making no reference to female characters. Likewise, well-known designer Reiner Knizia's combative two-player game *Lord of the Rings: The Confrontation* (2005) features none of Tolkien's (admittedly disempowered) heroines, such as Galadriel or Éowyn. Strategy wargames centred on building military forces and fighting other players commonly portray all-male armies, as in *Warrior Knights* (Konieczka, Faidutti, and Cléquin 2006), or those that include only a few fighting women, such as the arrow-firing Medusas in *Age of Mythology* (Drover 2003) or barely clothed and demonic Infernal Auditors who fight beside steroidal Spartan men in *Mythic Battles* (Vogt 2012). Grounded in one of the long-term bastions of patriarchal mythology, *Shadows over Camelot* (Laget and Cathala 2005) reinscribes the Arthurian legend's patriarchal assumptions entirely. While cards depicting the magician Merlin appear in a deck of beneficial white cards collected by players, a mournful portrait of the virtuous Queen Guinevere appears in the deck of black cards, which – along with evil sorceresses Morgan and Vivian – hamper the knights' progress. Drawing the Guinevere card forces all player-controlled knights to forfeit their current quest and return to Camelot, presumably due to the political distraction of Guinevere's well-known affair with Lancelot.

The overemphasis identified in video games on 'militarized masculinity' (Kline, Dyer-Witthford, and De Peuter 2003, 246) – and the associated enticement of players to engage in various forms of violent combat (Bryce and Rutter 2005, 303) – has similar ideological implications for board game culture. Combative frameworks often go hand-in-hand with the ubiquitous twin feminine stereotypes of the passive damsel in distress and the seductive, dangerous femme fatale. Even when able female characters are protagonist-heroes for players to control, such figures tend to be eroticised while simultaneously and uncritically replicating traditionally masculine activities and behaviours. In the fantasy board games *Runebound* (Wallace and Hardy 2005) and *Mage Knight* (Chvátal 2011), exaggerated breasts, slim waistlines, exposed thighs, and barely covered genitals connote the sexual availability (if not 'promiscuity') of women, whereas bulging muscles on men – often not covered by clothing as well – convey messages of power and dominance. Yet is this an intrinsic part of board gaming? Can fantasy narratives reject existing stereotypes? Or is it inevitable that a woman, as one scholar puts it, can only 'kick some ass as long as she herself has a nice one' (Schut 2006, 112)?

### **Beyond evil monsters and buxom beauties? Marginalisation and diversification in *Talisman***

Problematic representations of women – and a clear prioritisation of men and (hyper)masculinity – pervade fantasy worlds, with literary and filmic narratives replete with demonised and sexualised objects who lack power, agency, and/or value. Heavily influenced by the *Dungeons & Dragons* style of RPGs originating in the early 1970s, *Talisman: The Magical Quest Game* exemplifies this. Originally designed by Robert Harris and published by Games Workshop in 1983, with subsequent editions appearing in 1985 and 1994, the fourth edition (designed by John Goodenough and Robert Harris) first appeared under Black Industries in 2007. Fantasy Flight Games bought the licence and released a revised edition in 2008 – the edition we focus on – which upgraded the artwork and modernised the components of earlier versions, but is similar in overall structure and mechanics. Translated into French, German, Italian, Hungarian, and Polish, digital versions were also released for Steam and iPad in 2014. The longevity of *Talisman*, a relatively easy-to-learn two- to six-player game, attests to its popularity. There are ten official expansions, with another released in January 2015; these add characters, settings, and cards, making the revised fourth edition the most extensive *Talisman* game-world created.

Players control a character, represented by a card and plastic miniature, for the duration of a game (unless their character dies, in which case they must draw another). Gameplay in *Talisman* in many ways exemplifies Jeff Howard's definition of a quest as 'a journey across a symbolic, fantastic landscape in which a protagonist or player collects objects and talks to characters in order to overcome challenges and achieve a meaningful goal' (2008, xi). However, the talking Howard identifies is largely replaced in *Talisman* by fighting – although buying or selling items, gaining favours, or rolling dice for activities such as gambling sporadically occur. Notably, such activities solely enhance a character's chances at victory – principally through fighting. The gameplay mode is competitive: players cannot negotiate or trade, and if one character lands on another they may attack them in the hope of weakening them or stealing a treasured item (although the ethics of social gameplay might lead gamers to 'take it easy' on other, particularly newer, players). To win, players aim to traverse the increasingly hazardous Outer, Middle, and Inner regions of the board to reach the central Crown of Command, where they battle any other characters there to the death or attempt to cast a spell each turn to slowly kill all other characters in the game-world.

The mechanic of dice rolling for movement and attacking (subject to various modifiers) ensures that chance plays a large role in the game, although there is some player agency in how character alignment (Good, Evil, or Neutral) and particular abilities develop. A player's character card portrays their persona visually and provides essential information for gameplay, listing each character's Special Abilities and outlining their starting attribute values, such as life



Figure 9.1 Female playable characters in *Talisman* base game.

Source: Photograph by Adam Brown.

and 'fate' points, with the latter allowing limited dice re-rolls. Most importantly, the cards also note each character's starting 'Strength' and 'Craft', which are necessary for fighting creatures, monsters, and spirits. Players engage in either form of combat (physical or magical) throughout the game when drawing adventure cards, encountering certain spaces on the board, and (less frequently) attacking other players. Battles will mostly be *physical* ones – i.e. those requiring adequate Strength points to supplement the player's die roll. The rulebook defines a character's strength as representing their 'might, stamina, and fighting ability' for use in 'battle', which is sharply distinguished from a character's craft or 'intelligence, wisdom, and magical ability' used in 'psychic combat'. This distinction is crucial for gendering heroes.

Of the fourteen playable characters in the *Talisman* base game, only two are female: the Sorceress and Prophetess, who both carry gender markers within their names (Figure 9.1). Creating an intrinsic connection between biological sex and archetype – and, in some cases, species – is hardly empowering for women or men (none are named). However, even setting this aside, the character cards' aesthetic dimension generates heavily gendered meanings. Full-body portraits of the Prophetess and Sorceress give them long, flowing, and hardly battle-appropriate dresses, accentuating rounded hips and only partially covering full breasts. Just as Laura Mulvey's influential concept of the male gaze has been applied to fetishised female bodies in video games like *Tomb Raider* (Richard and Zaremba 2005; Schleiner 2001), such voyeurism encouraged in *Talisman* is also problematic. Mulvey (1975, 15) argues that the male spectator's gaze is aligned with the camera's



‘controlling male gaze’, which objectifies the female body. Further facilitating the eroticising male gaze, the sophisticated embroidery of the Prophetess’s dress surrounds a small red jewel that directs the gaze to the location of her vagina, while for the Sorceress a small white button serves the same function at the bottom of a V-shaped cut slanting downwards from her midsection. Regardless of their sex, each player should be able to identify with their character, being like the (male) screen protagonist Mulvey (1975, 12) argues ‘controls events’ (and the ‘erotic look’), which therefore becomes a ‘screen surrogate’ for the spectator. However, subjecting the female characters to an eroticising gaze disrupts this potential.

By contrast, male characters sport a wide variety of body shapes and sizes, from the armoured Warrior’s athletic posture, to the short Dwarf’s bulging muscles, to the overweight, balding Monk. The Elf seems to wear a codpiece beneath his trousers as if to counter the frequent feminisation – if not queering – of the species in other fantasy texts. The somewhat camp portrayal of the Minstrel, who wears an eccentric pink and purple outfit and plays a viol, offers a version of masculinity that strays from hegemonic manliness. Nevertheless, his heterosexual masculine dominance is explicitly asserted: he may ‘take the princess or maiden’ cards from any player he lands on. Male characters also span a range of ages from youthfulness to old age, whereas both women are relatively young with unlined faces.

While male hero attributes are diverse (see Figure 9.2), each female character’s attributes are almost identical (the Sorceress has one more Fate point than the Prophetess). Both have the same starting values of two Strength points and four Craft. Two Strength points is the minimum starting value of any character (including several male protagonists), implying that all men are at least as strong as all women. Some male characters with similar attributes nevertheless begin the game stronger: the Wizard has two Strength and five Craft, while the Elf begins the game with four Craft – the same as both female characters – but three Strength. The Wizard and Elf also possess Life and Fate points equal to or greater than either woman, signifying a lack of balance in quantity and ‘quality’ between women and men. Indeed, male heroes have a range of aptitudes, from the Troll who starts with six Strength and one Craft, to the Dwarf, Assassin, and Thief, each with a balance of three Strength and three Craft. Variability in starting values enhances a game’s replayability by enabling players to experiment with different strategies for winning, but here diversity rests only with men. More generally, the prescriptive nature of starting character attributes reveals *Talisman*’s limited flexibility regarding the all-important tension between ‘the authorial dictatorship of storytelling and the decision trees of game-playing’ (Lang and Harrigan 2007, 86): although attributes can be modified over time, enhancing them generally relies on battle success using the starting values. Thus, according to the rules of the game-world, it is ‘naturally’ harder for female heroes to improve their physical might, and being female is therefore a disadvantage.



Figure 9.2 Male playable characters in *Talisman* base game.

Source: Photograph by Adam Brown.

The starting skills for *Talisman*'s female characters implicitly link them with the less privileged magical arena. The first ability on each woman's character card grants them one spell, suggesting a seemingly more 'natural' affinity with magic rather than physical endeavours. The association of men with battlefield prowess and women who have a measure of independence and power with sorcery has a long history in fantasy narratives, with well-known examples in Arthurian mythology and *Lord of the Rings*. Even so, *Talisman*'s twenty-four Spell Cards emphasise the game-world's masculinity: the artwork of twenty-one cards depicts one or more men using and/or being affected by magic – including the Healing card (evoking an activity traditionally conceived as feminine), which portrays a stout-faced man holding the hand of a heavily bandaged figure. The remaining three Spell Cards portray either objects or an asexual grim reaper. Women, despite their apparent predisposition to sorcery, are absent, as if to affirm that men must dominate in all areas.

Another disjuncture in the presence of women and men in *Talisman* lies in the broader game-world. Indeed, in their role as 'world-building activities' (Goffman 1961, 27), in developing an interactive (though pre-constructed) narrative for players to progress through, games like *Talisman* generate a distinctive though heavily intertextual fictional universe in which to enact the narrative. The rulebook contextualises gameplay with a brief narrative backstory gleaned from the mythological narratives of Camelot and Tolkien's Middle-Earth, describing a 'mighty wizard' who ruled the land with a magical crown, before hiding this symbol of power and proclaiming 'with his dying breath that only a champion with the strength, wisdom, and courage to take



his crown would rule in his stead' (Goodenough and Harris 2007, 2). The constant attribution of masculine pronouns to 'the player' throughout the rulebook and certain instructions on game cards (an almost universal practice in tabletop games) further establish this masculine world.

The large game board provides little indication of the world's population, but directs players to draw adventure cards, which include weapons and items to collect; allies to join the heroes' cause; other characters who remain in a region to be revisited from time to time; and (more often) enemies to be confronted to gain experience and higher levels of strength and craft. Of the base game's 104 Adventure Cards, twenty-eight (27 per cent) depict men, while sixteen (15 per cent) portray women. While it is interesting that the Prince and Princess ally cards are effectively interchangeable (both can be exchanged for three gold at the castle), the representations on many other cards are less constructive. Reflecting binary associations of good women with idealised beauty and evil women with ugliness, the delicate and slender physique of the Angel, Fairy, and Maiden cards contrasts strongly with the hunched posture and huge noses of the Witch and Hag. A voyeuristic gaze is encouraged through the detailed drawing of a seductive Siren revealing exposed nipples behind a transparent bra-shaped layer of aquatic skin, while another image provides a sidelong view of a blonde woman's generous curves as she washes her dress, clothed in her undergarments. These women seem to 'connote "to-be-looked-at-ness"' (Mulvey 1975, 11), inviting an eroticising male gaze. The latter provocatively adorns the Fountain of Wisdom location card, which enables visitors to 'drink from the Fountain once per visit and take one craft', and may be read as subtly playing with a metaphor of the (or *a*) woman's sexual availability. Meanwhile, like the game's playable characters, adventure cards picturing male figures are more diverse in number and appearance: a player may encounter male Bandits, Hermits, Gnomes, Mercenaries, Giants, Demons, Mages, and others, all exhibiting a much greater variety of clothing styles, accessories, and body shapes and sizes.

Importantly, *Talisman*'s expansions diversify the game-world. Table 9.1 depicts the number of playable characters and overall 'presence' of women and men, illustrating a tension between the ongoing marginalisation of women and attempts to remedy this.

Despite the marked increase in playable female characters, the disproportion of female–male heroes and their presence in cards (categorised according to the gender of subject[s] clearly appearing in artwork or written text) remains. Interestingly, some cards display gender ambiguity, such as *The Dungeon* expansion's Holy Avenger ally card, which depicts a youthful human wearing shining armour and holding a massive sword. While some may read the exaggerated phallic symbol as a clue, the knight's 'feminine' facial features and body shape mark a lack of clarity. This suggests a shift away from binary understandings of gender; however, given the overemphasis on masculinity in the game-world and the passing significance of the adventure cards in game-play, such sporadic ambiguity does little to destabilise the dominant mode.

Table 9.1 'Presence' of women and men in the *Talisman* game-world

| <i>Box set</i>    | <i>Heroes</i> |             |              | <i>Adventure and spell cards</i> |             |              |
|-------------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|----------------------------------|-------------|--------------|
|                   | <i>Female</i> | <i>Male</i> | <i>Total</i> | <i>Female</i>                    | <i>Male</i> | <i>Total</i> |
| Base Game         | 2             | 12          | 14           | 16                               | 49          | 128          |
| The Reaper        | 1             | 3           | 4            | 16                               | 37          | 116          |
| The Dungeon       | 2             | 3           | 5            | 17                               | 32          | 158          |
| The Frostmarch    | 0             | 4           | 4            | 14                               | 31          | 104          |
| The Highland      | 4             | 2           | 6            | 18                               | 31          | 10           |
| The Sacred Pool   | 1             | 3           | 4            | 24                               | 28          | 88           |
| The Dragon        | 3             | 3           | 6            | 20                               | 35          | 168          |
| The Blood Moon    | 1             | 2           | 3            | 32                               | 29          | 121          |
| The City          | 2             | 4           | 6            | 17                               | 50          | 98           |
| The Firelands     | 2             | 2           | 4            | 13                               | 39          | 100          |
| The Nether Realm  | —             | —           | —            | 8                                | 8           | 36           |
| <b>Total</b>      | 18            | 38          | 56           | 195                              | 369         | 1127         |
| <b>Percentage</b> | 32%           | 68%         |              | 17%                              | 33%         |              |

Extra female heroes diversify the base game's initial offering of 'good woman' and 'evil woman' considerably, offering more diversity in body types and abilities. Several expansion rulebooks provide a brief narrative back-story for these characters, highlighting protagonists' different motivations and adding variety to the stereotypical Sorceress and Prophetess. Female heroes from *The Highlands* expansion include a Rogue motivated by money, a Sprite who helps the innocent, and a Valkyrie whose main goal is protecting virtuous people. Character card artwork enhances this diversification of femininities. Unlike the base game, most (though not all) subsequent female heroes are not similarly objectified: the Nomad (*The Firelands*), Cat Burglar (*The City*), and Vampire Hunter (*The Blood Moon*) are fully clothed. Several women also have an equal starting level of physical and magical ability, and one female figure – the Warlord – begins with four Strength and three Craft. Part of *The Firelands* expansion, released in early 2014 as the first boxset from new designer Samuel Bailey, the Warlord has an unconventionally large body and two ponytails falling over her shoulders. With her dress half-covered by a suit of armour and red cape, she is an imposing figure that arguably signals some acknowledgment of the need to incorporate more powerful and empowered women.

Another important development in *Talisman* expansions is the provision of alternative endings. While many of these maintain the endgame focus on killing enemies, 2012's *The Blood Moon* expansion adds the option to fundamentally alter the game's narrative by replacing the masculinist mentality of 'kill everybody' and 'winner takes all' with a cooperative mode of gameplay. According to the Lightbearers ending (the card of which 'feminises' the quest by featuring a graceful woman leading children on a journey, establishing a

somewhat problematic binary), characters may ‘freely exchange gold, Objects, and Followers when they encounter each other’ on the board, and players may not attack each other but will win or lose collectively. Some subversive potential is clearly demonstrated in the expanded game-world; however, it is important to note that the base game will in many cases be players’ only engagement with *Talisman* due to the financial commitment involved (purchasing all existing *Talisman* products from the Fantasy Flight website at the time of writing would cost over US\$350). In and of itself, attempting gender balance only in expansions marginalises female (character) participation. The ‘classic’ style of gameplay will likely still hold substantial sway among board gaming enthusiasts; nevertheless, the cooperative option reflects the increased variety in games across the ‘competitive–cooperative spectrum’ that now characterises board game culture as a whole (Brown and Waterhouse-Watson 2014), which leads to our next case study.

### **Subversion through sameness? The complexities of gender selection in *Legends of Andor***

In dismissing the significance of gendered stereotypes, John Beck and Mitchell Wade (2004, 50–51) argue that gamers choose to play ‘a vast array of female or male game characters’ whose appearance is customisable. However, this fails to consider the ideological impact of games’ gendered aesthetics and that even interactive options allowing customisation can be limited and limiting. There is risk in assuming that the ‘ability to choose a character of either gender who is just as strong, fast, smart, and likely to win as a character of the opposite gender instils in gamers the notion that anything is possible for either gender’ (Beck and Wade 2004, 51). Indeed, the design of a growing number of board games – most recently *Robinson Crusoe: Adventures on the Cursed Island* (Trzewiczek 2012) and *Legends of Andor* – appear to be partially built on this shaky premise, which can in fact disguise the normalisation of gendered discourse and power structures rather than deconstruct and contest them. Receiving extensive critical praise, German artist-designer Michael Menzel’s *Legends of Andor* is a cooperative game, requiring two to four players to work strategically together against the game, the mechanics of which automatically and/or randomly set goals, obstacles, and threats in their path. While the complex world of Menzel’s story-based game is far from what is conventionally considered an abstract Eurogame, it also differs in important ways from the majority of highly thematic ‘Ameritrash’ games (boardgamegeek 2013) like *Talisman*, particularly regarding gender.

*Legends of Andor*’s cooperative framework compels players to engage in many activities other than fighting: some Legend Cards, for example, instruct heroes to deliver a parchment to a specific location or gather herbs to save the King’s life. T.L. Taylor’s (2003, 41) ethnographic research into female players of MMORPGs underlines the importance of this diversity of character behaviours, finding that many women are passionately interested in games that

offer ‘venues for the interesting exploration of activities typically bounded off from each other – sociability and power, mastery and cooperation’. In a sense, this situates *Legends of Andor* more clearly as a ‘cross-gender’ game – one that ‘implies an awareness of both genders’ (Corneliussen 2008, 68) – and distances itself from both purely violent games and so-called ‘pink games’ focusing on friendship and socialising alone (Carr 2006, 172). Of course, the idea of a ‘cross-gender’ game itself risks essentialising gender; both female and male gamers have legitimate and genuine interests in what are imagined as the ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ domains. The clearest indication that *Legends of Andor* is designed, at least on the surface, to target both female and male gamers equally is in its construction of playable characters.

Playable characters are depicted on double-sided character boards and cardboard tokens on plastic stands used to mark track movement. Each hero board (featuring an archer, dwarf, warrior, or wizard) offers the choice between the female or male version of the character: one side depicts a woman; the other, a man. Therefore, a player would choose between ‘Mairen, Warrior of the Reeded Lands’ or ‘Thorn, Warrior of the Reeded Lands’. The only distinguishing features of the two sides are the character artwork, their names, and personal pronouns; all other elements – hero abilities, available fight dice, strength and willpower points – are identical. There is a curious limitation here, as, despite the pretence of gender equality, the game’s quick-start rules begin with the instruction that each player receive the ‘marker corresponding to *his* hero board’, adding an explanatory note to be applied to the rest of the rules: ‘When the word “hero” appears, it also *naturally* stands for “heroine”’ (our emphasis). This establishes masculine as the norm. Nevertheless, the game’s components offer players a clear choice between playing ‘as a woman’ or ‘as a man’.

The ‘gender selection’ offered by *Legends of Andor* has precedents in popular console games allowing gamers to select a female or male protagonist – and *Fable 2* (Molyneux 2008) even offers a once-off sex-change opportunity. While no concrete assumptions can be made about which option different female and male players of *Legends of Andor* will choose, one might tentatively assume that most – particularly given the lack of qualitative difference between the two – would select the version of their character that most closely reflects their own identity. This facet of the game arguably implies a sense of ‘naturalness’ in relation to male gamers wanting to be men – and vice versa – and potentially limits the chances of players experiencing gameplay from a gender other than one’s own, as repeated plays of *Talisman* will ensure. Crucially, Sarah Bowman’s research into role-playing games highlights the positive effects and affects of ‘alternate gender enactment’, which is commonly motivated by a desire to understand the mindset of another gender or escape conventional social demands (2010, 63–65). While it is simplistic – and problematic – to claim that players can instantly ‘become’ another sex, empathetic positioning of a player to identify with an identity category different from her/himself can have considerable value. The player’s identity does not



Figure 9.3 Female dwarf option in *Legends of Andor* (inset: male version).

Source: Photograph by Adam Brown.

disappear, but merges into what Mary Flanagan (2002, 438–439) identifies as a form of ‘double embodiment’ or ‘double consciousness’, which becomes – following Judith Butler’s (1990) theorisation of gender – a way of “‘knowing” through performance’.

The aesthetics of character board and markers are significant, as there is minimal difference in appearance between the sexes. Female characters have breasts, while male characters have slightly broader shoulders and thicker waists, but as all bodies blend into backgrounds or cloaks, the differences are barely noticeable and a glance may fail to discern any variation at all. The only differences between the female and male dwarves (see Figure 9.3) are the presence or absence of facial hair and number of pigtails. The small character tokens are essentially indistinguishable without close scrutiny. While this approach avoids a potentially problematic overemphasis on physical attributes, like muscles or breasts, the overwhelming emphasis on sameness suggests that gender is meaningless. This recalls Hilde Corneliussen’s analysis of different feminisms negotiated in *World of Warcraft* (Chilton, Pardo, and Kaplan 2004) via Joan Wallach Scott’s research into the Parité feminist movement in 1990s France. Corneliussen (2008, 63–64) writes:

Should women’s equal rights be based on their similarity to men, a standpoint posing a threat to the category of women by dissolving it, or should women claim their rights based on their difference from men, thus running the risk of reinforcing inequality by constructing women as a special group? ... [The] claim of the Parité movement was that individuals

were never neutral, but always male or female, and men and women need to be recognized as categories in society, but as meaningless categories. According to this view, gender equality is not motivated by the genders' qualities, and the paradox of equality versus difference is irrelevant.

The representation of character in *Legends of Andor*, and the interactive choice it promotes, closely reflects the perception of gender as a (heteronormatively conceived) 'meaningless anatomical dualism' (Corneliussen 2008, 81). Yet this implicit interchangeability of 'female-ness' and 'male-ness', which rests on an 'irrelevant' biological distinction signified aesthetically (though non-voyeuristically), is not without problems.

The broader development of the Andor game-world, embedded in patriarchal mythology, exemplifies the inherent flaw in presupposing gender's irrelevance. The game's introductory legend establishes the setting of peaceful Rietburg Castle, where 'the great King Brandur is worried and sends out his son Prince Thorald to ask for help from all parts of the countryside'. Subsequent story cards reveal that men control all other parts of this kingdom (major sections of the board). Additionally, Andor soon comes under attack by the dark mage Varkur and fearsome dragon Tarlok – both male. The only significant female character is Reka the Witch, who grants a 'brew' to double the results of fight de but lacks the power associated with land ownership; as the game notes, she is always 'hidden somewhere in the fog'. Beyond this social outcast, the only other reference to a female person on a story card is 'a farm girl [who] sings a beautiful melody' and increases the willpower of some heroes. Andor, it seems, is almost exclusively a world of men; choosing to play as Mairén rather than Thorn does little to disrupt this. In fact, the game's denial of difference implies that the patriarchy of the game-world is also irrelevant, an arguably post-feminist position. Thus, while *Legends of Andor* avoids some of the problems with gender-specificity seen in *Talisman*, its feminist potential has clear limitations. Many present-day feminist struggles rely on the recognition of biological difference, and the fact that equal participation in modern Western society is premised on (cis-)male biology cannot be contested by assuming that these categories are irrelevant.

## Conclusion

While there are limitations to examining game textualities and player positioning, as Ken McAllister (2004, 144) points out, 'it seems undeniable to me that spending hours in front of and interacting with a compelling game system has influential effects on players'. The subtle positioning of players in *Talisman* is steeped in patriarchal convention, though a tension builds through its expansions between reinforcing dominant ideas and creating more diverse and constructive playing experiences. By contrast, *Legends of Andor* exhibits a more reflexive (though not unproblematic) approach to representing



gender. Players face a seemingly innocuous decision, but one with ideological significance: to play as/with a woman or a man. In some ways an intervention in the debate over feminism's tension between similarity and difference, the process of gender selection in *Legends of Andor* may even limit the valuable opportunities gamers often have to 'play' with gender.

While the marginalisation of women and reinforcement of gendered stereotypes identified in this chapter apply to numerous other games, our attention was necessarily restricted to a few examples and further research into the cultural rhetoric of board games and how players negotiate this is needed. An expanded analysis of *Talisman* alone could examine the unofficial add-ons and user-generated content developed online. Our investigation of various (re)imaginings of gender in board games reveals three things: how gender consistently proves to be fundamental to the design of game components and mechanics; how important (and often problematic) representations of gender in fantasy board games often are; and how board game designers and artists have the potential to reinforce, resist, or revise normative gender representations. More constructive developments are often slow to occur and more work needs to be done, so – until a greater diversity of subject positions can be located in board game culture – game on.

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## 10 Supernatural hymens and bodies from hell

### Screening virginity through the gothic body

*Katherine Farrimond*

Gothic fictions have long held a fascination with virgins, virginity and its loss. Gothic genres, especially horror, are riddled with satanic virginal sacrifices, metaphorical explorations of the loss of innocence, and, of course, the much-discussed ‘final girl’ of the slasher film (Clover 1992). In this chapter, I explore the continuation of this fascination within three examples from contemporary film and television. In doing so I ask how the gothic body enables an exploration of shifting definitions and understandings of virginity, and of the complex relation between virginity, subjectivity and gender. Tamar Jeffers McDonald argues that ‘virginity causes, and is revealed and made visible through conflict’ (Jeffers McDonald 2010, 3). This conception of virginity underpins my argument here, as the conflicts set into motion by the gothic bodies in my examples – demonic and angelic possession, vampiric bodily rejuvenation, and the supernaturally restored body – all prompt an exploration and interrogation of the concept of virginity itself.

While, as I explore in more detail later in this chapter, virginity is a complex topic with multiple meanings, definitions, and implications, the way that it is addressed in much mainstream popular culture remains highly normative in terms of gender and sexuality, and its most common definitions are firmly embedded in very limited and limiting understandings of sex and relationships. Virginity and its loss is, crucially, a social construction, as virginity can be defined in terms of personal history, memory, physical actions and experiences, sexual identity, and physiology. When there are so many approaches to what defines ‘sex’, to which acts and under what circumstances these constitute sexual activity, there cannot be one clear-cut, universally agreed definition of what makes someone a virgin. Despite this, though, the nature of virginity as a category is so frequently taken for granted, and further, despite its social construction, has untold significance for many people on personal, cultural, and social levels. To dismiss it is neither possible, nor necessarily appropriate or desirable. In this chapter, therefore, I argue that the gothic body offers a crucial site in which the centrality of virginity to popular understandings of sexual life becomes apparent, and where the cracks begin to show in conventional narratives of what virginity is, and when it is lost.

While the majority of writing on virginity in popular culture focuses on young women, in this chapter I interrogate the gothic body in relation to virginity for men and women. In doing so, it is first useful to briefly clarify the terminology I use here. Throughout this chapter I refer to women's and men's virginities, not because there is an essential difference in what constitutes a woman's or man's virginity, but because it explores the assumption that virginity is rooted in the body and can be particularly defined by the physiology of bodies that have been sexed as female at birth. While all the characters discussed here are cissexual, and this is an important but unspoken assumption in the way their virginities are defined in the texts, my use of 'men' and 'women' is not limited to cis people, but instead refers to the specifics of occupying a particular gender identity, and the implications of that identity for the way virginity is understood and constructed, regardless of the gender assigned at birth. So, for the purposes of this chapter, unless specified otherwise, or the physiology of cis women is referred to (for example, the hymen), my use of 'women' or 'woman' refers to all people who identify as part of that social and cultural category.

Pete Falconer discusses the role of virginity within horror, and in particular argues that the genre is invested in exploring concerns arising from the intangibility of virginity (Falconer 2010, 125). While this is certainly the case in the classic horror examples he discusses, there has in recent years been a movement in horror-inflected film and television not only to explore the troublingly abstract nature of virginity, but also to move beyond this, so that narrative functions as an attempt to find solutions to this anxiety through metaphors and complexities of the gothic body. This shift can be seen as the product of the genre's fascination with the boundaries and limits of the body, combined with an increased emphasis within wider Western culture on unpacking and interrogating the complexities of virginity.

Texts which contain elements of gothic, horror, and fantasy are particularly useful in thinking about virginity, as these are genres which have been traditionally interested in the boundaries of the body and its relation to subjectivity. These genres – and, as numerous film and literary critics have noted, there is a certain degree of slippage and cross-pollination between these categories – have the potential both to shore up normative boundaries and definitions of the body, and to disrupt them. Science fiction texts have been identified by Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska as able to 'open up imaginative possibilities, ... create new spaces, dimensions and frontiers that re-define the human sphere of operation', and I argue that this point applies equally to horror film which is rooted in the supernatural (King and Krzywinska 2000, 1–2). By contrast, Jenny Wolmark suggests that the use of alien and non-human humanoid bodies actually 'enables difference to be constructed in terms of binary oppositions which reinforce relations of dominance and subordination' (1993, 2). Genres of the unnatural and supernatural, then, provide an ambivalent space for understanding the relationship between the body and subjectivity, in which conservative understandings of, for example,

embodied sexuality and experience, may be reinforced, radically disrupted, or complicated by some combination of the two.

Even within supposedly factual media, 'unusual' configurations of the body inherently provoke epistemological responses in relation to virginity. A recent example of the ways in which understandings and definitions of virginity are continuously produced and consolidated within contemporary popular culture occurred in 2012 on ITV's *This Morning* (11 January 2012) in an item entitled 'I Have Two Vaginas'. In this piece, presenters Phillip Schofield and Holly Willoughby interviewed Hazel Jones, a woman born with uterus didelphys, a rare medical condition where the uterus and vaginal cavity are bisected by a septum. What is significant about the interview is the way in which Schofield introduced and managed questions of Jones's virginity. As Jones discussed her early sexual experiences, citing the immaturity of her partners as a key reason for the experiences being unpleasant, Schofield interjected with the words 'you've two hymens to break, so you've lost your virginity twice, that in itself is going to be uncomfortable'. Jones responded with 'Yes, both times not good', but did not go into any further detail about the physical nature of the discomfort. So, while Jones identified two lost virginities, it was Schofield who situated these virginities specifically in the body, and more particularly in the 'breaking' of the hymen – which, as I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, is physiologically a tissue that rarely spans the vaginal cavity in such a way that it may actually be perforated, contrary to popular understanding.

There are a lot of reasons why Jones's early sexual experiences might have been unpleasant, not all of them related to her anatomy, but for Schofield the key issue lay in bodily barriers and the totemic 'breaking' of the hymen(s). Jones and the gynaecologist who was also interviewed were not really given the chance to address this, and the discussion quickly moved on to the details of Jones's sex life more generally. Interestingly, the headline to the *Daily Mail* report following the item read 'I lost my virginity twice: Woman, 27, reveals she has TWO VAGINAS' (Bates 2012), suggesting that Schofield's interpretation is assumed to be accurate enough that it could be reported as Jones's own words. It is significant to note that the *Daily Mail* did not interview Jones, but reported on the *This Morning* item alone. This story indicates three key things. First, that bodies with physiology that confounds normative scientific and popular understandings of sexual organs tend to provoke much greater interrogation and uncertainty in response to sexual activity in general, and virginity in particular, in much the same way as the fictional gothic examples I introduce later in this chapter; second, that women's virginity and its loss is so frequently diagnosed and defined by people other than the woman in question within popular discourses about sexual experience; and third, that these diagnoses are delineated primarily in bodily terms. For the remainder of this chapter, I will turn to three key examples of the ways that the non-normative body functions as a site of conflict over definitions of virginity in gothic fantasy texts.

### Gothic virginity and subjectivity

*Jennifer's Body* (Kusama 2009) is a film about two girls in a small Midwestern US town, who go to see Low Shoulder, a struggling indie band, at their local bar. Jennifer's friend Needy tells the singer of Low Shoulder that Jennifer is a virgin to protect her from what she interprets as his sleazy assumptions about her best friend. The band then kidnaps Jennifer, and she, presuming them to be rapists, announces: 'yes, I'm a virgin. I've never even done sex, I don't know how, so you guys should go find somebody who does.' The band members take Jennifer at her word, and then, dreaming of being 'rich and awesome, like that guy from Maroon 5', attempt to sacrifice her in the woods as part of a satanic ritual. However, Jennifer has already told Needy, and thus informed the audience, that she hasn't been a virgin since junior high. Her lack of virginity causes the sacrifice to fail. Jennifer doesn't die, but instead is possessed by a demon which makes her close to invincible, provided she eats human flesh regularly, which she attains by seducing then devouring the teenage boys at her school, and can only be killed by a knife to the heart, which Needy eventually delivers when Jennifer kills her boyfriend.

While this narrative of a woman who has had heterosexual intercourse and who then claims to be a virgin initially appears to be one in which Jennifer is lying about her virginity, it can be usefully viewed through recent theorisations of virginity which do not necessarily view virginity loss as rooted in the body, or as a one-time-only deal. As I outline elsewhere, virginity can also be seen as an affective, personally defined category (Farrimond 2013, 44). For example, Hanne Blank's essay 'The Process Oriented Virgin' foregrounds the importance of emotional reaction in the assignment of virginal status, and begins with an anecdote in which a young woman explains that her first ever experience of sex did not count. The woman states that: "I just didn't feel like I'd really done it, you know, not for real ... Not until about a year later. I kept feeling like I was a virgin. Until I finally had an orgasm while I was having sex with a partner. That was when I lost my virginity" (Blank 2008, 288). Blank goes on to expand this woman's experience, and that of hundreds of other people whose virginity stories do not fit conventional models, into a broader theory of a virginity defined by feeling and instinct, so that 'outsider perspectives do not necessarily carry more weight than their [the process oriented virgins'] own' when it comes to defining and identifying the moment at which a person makes the transition from virgin to nonvirgin' (Blank 2008, 291). In this emotionally rooted model of virginity, Blank argues, "losing your virginity" [is] a subjective, not objective, transition' (Blank 2008, 297).

This model of virginity is further supported by Kate Monro's collection of tales of virginity loss. In asking how men know they've lost their virginities, Monro suggests that '[Virginity loss] can be defined in any number of ways, largely depending on how we *feel*' (Monro 2011, 14; emphasis in original). While Monro maintains that there is, largely speaking, a 'technical' virginity – penetrative sex – the various reminiscences of her interviewees indicate the



significance of emotional response. Similarly, in Laura M. Carpenter's study of virginity loss, Carpenter devotes a chapter to interrogating definitions of virginity and concludes that virginity loss is frequently viewed flexibly, emotionally, and multiply (Carpenter 2005, 44). The process-oriented virgin, I contend, offers a significant perspective from which to view not only the radical possibilities of a foregrounding of affect in the definition of virginity, but also the ways in which issues of feeling and emotion are predominantly sidelined in the dominant cultural narratives about virginity and its loss. A subjective, discursive approach to virginity offers a perspective from which to view virginity as personally and culturally significant, as well as socially constructed.

Virginity can be framed as not merely biological or lost through acts of penetration, but as a more complex, often discursive strategy, rooted in emotion, self-preservation, and performance. Kathryn Schwarz argues that women's shifting and fluid interpretation of their own virginity is indicative of, but not necessarily pandering to, a patriarchal culture invested in controlling and limiting women's sexuality:

We are self-consciously accustomed to thinking of sexuality in complicated terms, and our culture does not link female virginity to male dominance in any uncontested way. Media exposés that hail virginity as a trend; advice books that characterize it as an asset and a tool; women who 'revirginate'; plastic surgeons who reconstruct hymens – virginity in such instances does at least as much to revise, resist, and evade statements about patriarchal power as it does to confirm them.

(Schwarz 2002, 10)

For Jennifer, virginity is something that she can attempt to use as a means of self-protection. Although this attempt fails, the complexity and potential power of the term's relationship with patriarchal power is certainly hinted at here. *Jennifer's Body* begins to investigate the possibilities of these various strategies for a more complex virginity, and the assertion of Jennifer's virginity by both Needy and Jennifer herself functions as an example of the way in which virginity might be assumed as a protective mantle, an instinctive response to a dangerous patriarchal culture which vilifies sexually active young women and presumes them to be 'fair game' for sexual assault. However, while Jennifer may claim a status for herself that disrupts conventional understandings of female virginity, in a way that may appear to be a resistant strategy, the satanic ritual of Low Shoulder foils this claim. Her body, when it encounters the supernatural, physically protests her claimed status as a virgin, so that the ritual does not run according to plan. There is, the film seems to imply, a clearly defined physical state of virginity that Jennifer does not possess. Her body 'knows' somehow that she has had intercourse, thus privileging the biological and bodily over the affective, emotional, and instinctive, and this causes the ritual to fail.



This insistence on a bodily model of virginity is not a new phenomenon. In her book on the cultural history of virginity, Anke Bernau details the medical establishment's repeated search for proof of virginity in the body since antiquity, whether through the hymen, the pressure and colour of urine when it is released from the body, pain and bleeding at first intercourse, the size of the uterus (Bernau 2007, 6–7). In addition to this, the representation of the female body in *Jennifer's Body* echoes a cinematic tradition stretching from the medical narratives in woman's pictures of classical Hollywood, as in Mary Ann Doane's account of the medical discourse of 1940s melodramas (Doane, 1987), to more recent cinema about the supernatural, in which the female body is called upon to display its symptoms and give evidence of its inner workings. As Carol Clover argues, 'occult films do their best, in much the same way pornography does, to make the female body "speak its experience"' (Clover 1992, 109). *Jennifer's Body*, despite its initial willingness to engage with potentially subversive articulations of virginity, ultimately appears to function in the tradition of the symptomatic female body. In this model, women's bodies, particularly when subjected to testing and observation by patriarchal figures, tell all that needs to be known about women's subjectivity, leaving little room for the emotional, the instinctive, or the reflexive woman's voice which can define her own experience. *Jennifer's Body*, like many of the narratives before it, presents the woman's body as just such a symptomatic document. Her lack of virginity is intrinsic, physical, and so resists her attempts to claim otherwise by failing to die like a good virgin, but instead survives, only to become a hyperbolic caricature of the man-eating slut.

### Virginity and the female body

Around 2009, feminist and sex education websites began to draw an increasing amount of attention to the complexities of virginity.<sup>1</sup> In particular, these resources point to inaccuracies in popular understandings of the hymen. This wave of activity arguably followed the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education's widely publicised pamphlet suggesting that the hymen be renamed the vaginal corona in an attempt to dispel some of the mythology surrounding the hymen, and to better reflect the philological qualities of the hymen (Swedish Association for Sexuality Education 2009). The hymen is often envisioned as a physical barrier which covers the vaginal opening and which is pierced by first intercourse, causing bleeding and pain, but which may sometimes be broken by other earlier physical activity such as horse-riding. However, the hymen rarely covers the whole opening of the vagina – such occurrences constitute a potentially dangerous medical condition – and it is usually worn away by early adolescence due to its fragility. Bleeding in first intercourse is much more likely to be caused by unlubricated rough penetration damaging the delicate vaginal tissue. As a result of this, it is fairly unusual for a woman to even have any significant traces of hymen left by the first time she has penetrative vaginal intercourse. Alternatively, depending on

elasticity, some women retain a substantial hymen, even following years of penetrative sex. The popped cherry should, therefore, be seen in metaphorical terms only. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider the representation of the body as the site of virginity in two television series and, in both cases, examine the significance of the hymen to these understandings.

The HBO television series *True Blood* (2008–) uses the supernatural body to explore articulations of biological and emotional virginity. Jessica is a sheltered country girl, made a vampire before she had even had a first kiss. Over the course of season two of the programme, shortly after becoming a vampire, she meets, falls in love with, and has vaginal intercourse with Hoyt, an equally inexperienced human man (2.8, ‘Timebomb’). Later that night, they attempt to have sex again, but Jessica cries out in pain, and the following exchange ensues:

*Hoyt:* Is that blood, again? But ...

*Jessica:* My ... it fucking grew back. Everything heals when you’re a god-damn vampire!

*Hoyt:* It’s gonna be beautiful, every time will be like the first time.

*Jessica:* [angry] It’ll hurt like hell. I’m a fucking deformity of nature. I’m gonna be a virgin forever!

Jessica is, understandably, upset. The first time they had sex, it was initially painful, but eventually she enjoyed it; however, now she is faced with the prospect that vaginal intercourse will ‘hurt like hell’ every time, due to the regrowth of her hymen. What is less expected about this scene is Jessica’s final declaration that she will be a virgin forever. The first instance of intercourse between Hoyt and Jessica is preceded by much discussion about having never done ‘it’ before, about wanting the first time to be ‘special’; and the second instance, where Jessica discovers her body’s incredible healing powers, is preceded by her asking Hoyt to ‘make love to me again please?’ This dialogue frames their initial intercourse very clearly as a ‘loss of virginity’ scene, marking the transition from virgin to non-virgin for both characters. And yet, at the discovery of the regrowth of her hymen, Jessica declares – unhappily – that she is still a virgin, and expects to remain one forever.

Not only does *True Blood*’s treatment of Jessica’s vampire virginity support the mythology of the hymen as a reliable marker of virginity, and as a fleshy barrier that spans most, if not all, of the vagina until penetration occurs, but the rejuvenative powers of Jessica’s vampire body contradict her experience and emotional reaction to her virginity. This text clings closely to biological constructions of female virginity, privileging the presence of a hymen over everything else, including penetrative sex acts and Jessica’s feeling of having ‘done it’. The regrowth of her hymen renders these factors null and void, to the extent that Jessica can only take stock of the situation in despair. There is a strong sense of hopelessness in her assertion of permanent virginity, which implies that, while her physical state as a hymenally intact ‘virgin’ might be

at odds with her emotional and instinctive position of having already had intercourse, she is not in a position to challenge this state of affairs, her body takes priority over her subjective sense of her own sexual status. It is worth noting here that Hoyt's own virginity is not subject to any such scrutiny, and the question of whether a man whose only sexual experience is with a woman who still has a hymen might himself still be a virgin is not raised. The strict biological definition of virginity only seems to apply to women here. Significantly, Hoyt's understanding of virginity is one of beauty, romance, and gift-giving, which does not consider the potentially harmful aspects of the repeated 'first time' on Jessica. This exchange raises the two dominant narratives about the loss of women's virginity – specialness and pain – and indicates a telling lack of compatibility between these two threads, the one symbolic, the other physical.

The representation of Jessica's virginity in *True Blood* again refuses a feminist model of flexible virginity based on feeling and instinct, and places emphasis clearly on the body as a means of identifying the 'presence' of virginity, echoing Clover's argument about the occult female body being called upon to give evidence of its reality. Jessica's body, like Jennifer's, becomes a text that can be read for signs of virginity, so that the physical is privileged over the emotional, and process-oriented virginity is rejected as a possible model for understanding women's sexual experience. Supernatural bodies function, in these texts, as means of regulating and reading virginity. Jennifer's possession by a demon is presented as proof that she is not 'really' a virgin, despite her claims to the contrary, while Jessica's positive feelings towards her first sexual experience are contradicted by a vampire body that demands she will forever return to the physical condition she was in at the point of her becoming a vampire.

### Virginity and men

While gothic texts tend to focus on women's virginity, the gothic still provides space for exploration of the relationship between men's virginity and the body. In the final section of this chapter, I turn to the US series *Supernatural*, which began its run in 2005 and is still on the air. The series follows two brothers, Dean and Sam Winchester, as they drive around the country solving supernatural mysteries and battling demons, angels, and everything in between. Since the beginning of its fourth season, the programme has demonstrated an apparently casual but tellingly frequent interest in virginity and its relationship to the body. The programme is filled with mentions of virginity, from references to the 'frustrated' virginity of teenage boys (5.12, 'Swap Meat') to a description of a character as a 'nice girl with a promise ring' who is involved in a cannibalism case (5.14, 'My Bloody Valentine'), as well as more sustained plots around virginity, such as the season six episode 'Like a Virgin', in which a dragon kidnaps virginal women to use in a ceremony designed to open up the gates to purgatory (6.12). Here, I am going to focus on

two particular aspects of the programme's engagement with virginity: Dean's belief that he is a born again virgin in season four (4.5, 'Monster Movie'), and the conversations that take place around the angel Castiel's virginity in season five (5.3, 'Free to Be You and Me').

To begin with Dean's narrative: Dean spends much of the first three seasons having sex with, talking about having sex with, or encouraging other people to have sex with, a lot of women. Then, at the end of season three, by means of a vastly complicated plotline, Dean is sent to hell, before being returned to earth again several months later by angels. However, the process of Dean's return from hell involves the total restoration of his body. As his mentor Bobby points out, 'your chest was ribbons, your insides were slop, AND you'd been buried for four months. Even if you could slip out of hell and back into your meat suit ...' to which Dean replies: 'I know, I should look like a "Thriller" video reject.' (4.1, 'Lazarus Rising'). Instead of this monstrous zombie body, Dean is returned to earth in a perfect, 'healed' body, as indicated by his confused perusal of himself in the mirror (4.1, 'Lazarus Rising'). The question of what happened to Dean's body is then dropped until several episodes later, when the following exchange occurs:

*Dean:* Man, it is time to right some wrongs.

*Sam:* Come again?

*Dean:* Look at me. I came back from the furnace without any of my old scars, right? No bullet wounds, no knife cuts, none of the off-angled fingers from all the breaks. I mean, my hide is as smooth as a baby's bottom. Which leads me to conclude, sadly, that my virginity is intact.

*Sam:* What??

*Dean:* I have been rehy-menated.

*Sam:* Rehy—? Please! Dean, maybe angels can pull you out of hell, but no one can do that.

*Dean:* Brother! I have been rehy-menated! And the dude will not abide.

(4.5, 'Monster Movie')

Dean's insistence that he is 'rehy-menated' demonstrates a reading of virginity as explicitly contained within the body, rather than in memory, history, or experience. His body's lack of scarring and broken bones is extrapolated to include the renewal of the more intangible concept of virginity. As Falconer observes, 'although supposedly located in the body, [virginity] is only ambiguously physical' (Falconer 2010, 125). This ambiguity surrounding the corporeality of virginity leads Dean to cast the virginal as both an absence – a result of the cleansing, or rebuilding of his body, but also as a presence – a symbolic bodily quality, a rehy-menisation, that must be removed as soon as possible. For the man whose previous sexual experience was prized and flaunted and played a significant role in his identity and personal expression, the renewal of his body equates to a blank slate, but one which can only be expressed in terms of a physically present virginity, indicating that

male virginity is complex, ambiguous, and confusing, despite its apparent simplicity.

Significantly, Dean understands his newfound virginity through the conventional terminology of women's virginity, and the assumptions and meanings circulating around the hymen. This terminology is played for laughs and frames Dean as a slightly dim horny guy who doesn't understand his own body; however, I think the bodily specificity of the language used is still significant beyond this. The humour of the scene lies in the knowledge that cisgender male bodies do not have hymens, and, as previously discussed, the physiological implications of the hymen for defining and diagnosing *women's* virginity are ultimately hazy and culturally misunderstood. The notion that men's virginity can *only* be understood through the terms of an already unstable understanding of the body here. This suggests a failed attempt to negotiate the confusing terrain of men's virginity that is presumed to be clear-cut and easily defined, but ultimately offers only further contradictions, complexities and complications. Dean's reading of his virginity through the terms used to define the cisgender female body, then, both represents an attempt to fix these complexities to the tangible and bodily, and demonstrates the impossibility of doing so, as his claims are so unconvincing.

The picture of virginity becomes complicated still further by a development in season five. Despite Dean's understanding of virginity being framed as fundamentally corporeal, a later incident concerning the angel Castiel undermines this. In the season five episode 'Free to Be You and Me' (5.3), Castiel comes to the conclusion that he will be killed the following day, to which Dean responds by asking what he's going to do with his final night on earth, and suggests that women should be involved. Castiel looks uncomfortable, causing Dean to ask: 'you have been with a woman before? Or an angel at least?' Castiel replies that he's 'never had occasion', so that Dean says: 'alright. Let me tell you something: there are two things I know for certain. One, Bert and Ernie are gay. Two, you are not going to die a virgin. Not on my watch. Let's go.' This scene may seem to point to a simple model of virginity, and one presented in highly heteronormative terms, despite its juxtaposition with Dean's throwaway reference to homosexuality, in which Castiel has never 'been with' another being, angel, or human, and is therefore a virgin.<sup>2</sup> However, the nature of Castiel's embodiment dramatically complicates this, particularly in the context of Dean's previous rehymentation. In the *Supernatural* universe, the true appearance and sound of angels is too much for most humans to take – looking at an angel in their heavenly form can result in a person's eyes burning to nothing in their sockets. Because of this, angels inhabit 'vessels' in a way that very closely echoes the demonic possessions that occur throughout *Supernatural*, and in the horror tradition more broadly. A force (in the case of angels, it is a bright light) pours into the body and the human personality is suppressed by a more powerful supernatural presence. Castiel explains that his body is that of a 'devout man' who prayed to be used as an angel's vessel. Jimmy Novak, the devout man that Castiel possesses, has already been shown to be a man with a wife and child.

These flashbacks strongly suggest that Castiel's *body*, at least, has already had intercourse with a woman. While Dean viewed his own virginity as rooted explicitly in his new body over and above any memory or history of sex, he views Castiel's virginity as something that can be found in a more affective experience, in the *soul*, rather than the body. While Castiel's vessel body has had sex, Castiel the angelic force has not. Jimmy Novak is so deeply suppressed by the angelic possession that his personality, memory, and non-virginal status do not figure in Castiel's sense of his own virginity at all. The difference between Castiel and Jimmy is marked by actor Misha Collins' contrasting performances when representing the angel and the human, implying a significant split between the two, and the complete inhibition of the human. Jimmy Novak's body is arguably feminised by this inhabitation, as it recalls the penetrable, leaky body of Kristeva's abject woman, and Creed's monstrous feminine (Creed, 1993; Kristeva, 1982). The body, in the framing of Dean's virginity, is everything, but when it comes to Castiel's virginity, the body is irrelevant, and does not appear to have its own memory, a key contradiction that indicates that male virginity is more complex and hard to define than might otherwise be assumed. In both cases, virginity is characterised by ghostly markers of female virginity, from Dean's evocation of the hymen to Castiel's inhabitation of a penetrable body that suggests that a language for describing men's virginity and its hidden complexities does not exist. Virginity, at least linguistically, is feminine here.

It should be noted here that *Supernatural*, as a long-running television show with multiple writers and directors, is perhaps inevitably filled with contradictions in the lore surrounding its monstrous and supernatural inhabitants, as well as errors in the show's continuity. This facet of the programme has been repeatedly criticised by fans and recappers, most notably by Demian on the recently closed recap site and fan forum *TV Without Pity* (TWOP 2014), as well as the 'Canon Discrepancies' section of the *Supernatural Wiki* (Supernatural Wiki 2014). These complaints often point towards a lack of attention to detail from the programme's creators, and even suggest such oversights and contradictions are insulting to the fans' intelligence. As such, the show's lack of coherent narratives surrounding, for example, the processes required to destroy demons might be extended to the treatment of virginity in *Supernatural*, so that the rules are frequently changing due to a lack of care given to the programme's internal logic in general. The two key episodes I discuss in this chapter are, unsurprisingly, the product of completely different writers and directors. However, despite this, I contend that the contradictory nature of virginity in *Supernatural* might be read as symptomatic, not only of the incoherence of lore in such a long-running show with multiple writers and directors, but also of uncertainty and anxiety surrounding the nature of virginity in general. That two different writer/director teams would envision such different models of virginity points to the multiplicity of conceptions of virginity and its definition.

*Supernatural's* primary concern has been critically identified as the lack of control that the central characters have over their lives and, more specifically,



their bodies. As Suzette Chan notes, 'from living under their father's command, to being infected with demon blood or resurrected by angels, it has become clear that neither Sam nor Dean has an exclusive claim on his own body – or his fate' (Chan 2010). Throughout the series, Dean and Sam have endured demonic possessions, infections, forcible changes to their bodies such as accelerated ageing and the sudden supernatural imposition of stomach cancer, the magical removal of organs, and being involuntarily moved through space and time. They are sent down to hell, up to heaven, and are consistently at the mercy of destiny, ghosts, demons, gods, and monsters. The Winchester brothers are rarely permitted control over their lives, and this is made still more apparent in the series' focus on the instability of the (male) body. As has been so frequently pointed out, there is a cultural relationship between masculinity and the hard body, and this relationship is frequently troubled and resolved in fictional media (Baker 2006). In *Supernatural*, bodies which would usually appear to be hardened and impenetrable are revealed through the multitudes of demonic possession to be leaky and easily invaded. As Stacey Abbott suggests of *Supernatural*, 'the show undercuts the perception of the body as contained and complete', before arguing that the depiction of human bodies as merely 'meat suits', and 'vessels' or, as Dean refers to the possibility of becoming a vessel for the angel Michael, an 'angel condom', 'reduces humanity to the corporeality of the body, emptied of a soul' (Abbott 2011, 12). *Supernatural* demonstrates a clear interest in the relationship between the body and the personality, the soul, the 'real' you, and consistently represents this relationship as troubled and ambiguous, as easily destroyed or changed without the subject's consent. It is a result of this core concern that Dean's contradictory attitudes towards the body as the site of virginity emerge. While virginity is popularly imagined as clearly defined, easy to identify and describe, this is, as the recent glut of work on virginity demonstrates, not the case. Dean's responses to virginity constitute an attempt to comprehend and negotiate the contradictions surrounding the connection between body, soul, sexual identity, and personality.

Given *Supernatural*'s focus on the Winchesters' lack of control over their own bodies, Dean's proactive, authoritative claim over the status of his virginity – 'it's time to right some wrongs ... the dude will not abide' – demonstrates a desire to reclaim some of that control, to self-define, to assert ownership over a body that has been changed without his consent. It also gestures towards a fantasy of a body that is legible, that can speak its virginity clearly and without ambiguity. Sam's bemused, distrustful reaction to Dean's claims of rehy-menation, and the contradictions between Dean's reading of his own virginity as bodily, and Castiel's as non-bodily, points towards the complexity of virginity and its loss. This shows a struggle to reconcile conflicting definitions within an existence in which the body is already confusing and unstable. *Supernatural* is a series deeply preoccupied with the tensions between the mind and body, and the examples I have discussed demonstrate a particular interest in the ways that these tensions might impact upon sexual identity and experience in the context



of an increasing critical interrogation of the notion of virginity. Virginites are often complex and – at least in part – discursively constructed, and the series speaks to both the fantasy and the impossibility of a coherent, corporeal, and universal definition of virginity.

## Conclusion

*Jennifer's Body*, *True Blood*, and *Supernatural* are all self-conscious, often ironic texts that mock generic conventions of horror and gothic monstrosity. It is significant, then, that within this reflexive and knowing approach to their generic categories these texts still predominantly shore up constructions of virginity which are rooted in the body, rather than in emotion. Despite their apparent desire to rewrite and disrupt conventions of horror and the occult, these texts propagate a heteronormative biological mythology of virginity, which removes the possibility of a subjective, personal, and emotional approach to sexual experience. As I suggested earlier, the slippery genre of horror occupies an ambivalent space in relation to normative constructions of the body and subjectivity, and in these texts, the body and its ability to speak its experiences is privileged over the emotional and the instinctive. There may be, then, little room for process-oriented virgins in contemporary horror texts.

It might be argued that as virginity is a purely symbolic concept, and one that does much to limit women's sexuality, a move to abandon the term and its mythology altogether might be a more worthwhile endeavour than an attempt to map its complexities. However, virginity is not an idea or a model of sexual experience that shows any signs of disappearing, and, however it is conceptualised, it functions as a valuable marker of changing subjectivity for many. As Blank suggests, 'virginity is still a meaningful term, and the sexual status it indicates is still important. But its importance is increasingly private rather than public, personal rather than institutional or familial' (Blank 2007, 253). What texts like *Jennifer's Body*, *True Blood*, and *Supernatural* indicate is the tension between these public, institutional notions of virginity, and the personal, private, reflexive model that Blank describes.

In this chapter I have drawn on the rapidly evolving field of virginity studies, and argued that its interdisciplinary complexity presents an exciting and radical space for understandings of sexual experience. I have identified a movement in this field away from conservative readings of the body based on anatomy and activity, and towards reflexive feminist strategies which foreground emotion, feeling, and instinct. I have also suggested that gothic genres and the conflicts around the body that such genres raise offer a useful lens through which to consider the ways in which virginity and sexual experience are represented in recent gothic texts, and to ask whether these texts have space for the notion of the process-oriented virgin. The constructions of virginity in *Jennifer's Body*, *True Blood*, and *Supernatural* suggest that, while the body remains the privileged site of virginity, this is by no means the full extent of the picture. Sometimes, it seems, feeling like a virgin is enough.

## Notes

- 1 See Palo Alto Medical Foundation (2013, Planned Parenthood, Scarleteen (2009, *Huffington Post* (2011), *Everyday Feminism* (2013, *International Women's Health Coalition* (2010), amongst many others.
- 2 In the *Supernatural* universe, homosexuality is periodically mentioned, usually in the form of laddish jokes, or incidents where the brothers are mistaken for a couple, only for such misunderstandings to be quickly identified as embarrassing and to be dismissed. While the show is overt in acknowledging the popularity of homoerotic slash fiction, written by fans about the main characters, it also distances itself from the possibility of such narratives being absorbed into the show's canon.

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# 11 The tale of the women

## Female gender, gender roles, and sexuality in Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch*

*Keridwen N. Luis*

### Introduction

One of the most popular current threads within the fantasy genre is the retelling of fairy tales. These tales are retold as novels, films, television, comic books, paintings, and in many other forms.<sup>1</sup> Emma Donoghue's short story sequence *Kissing the Witch* (1997) is therefore part of a much larger tradition within fantasy, yet it also partakes of a different tradition: the feminist tradition of undoing, recasting, and revealing. Fairy tales often provide us with the pleasure of nostalgia or the security of tradition, but Donoghue imbues them with an inverting lens that allows us to see the invisible, to question our roles in the world, and to queer not only desire but also the structure of the tale itself.

Retold fairy tales have a tendency to make use of updated characters but not updated plots. Elizabeth Wanning Harris reminds us that 'We need to begin by acknowledging that all fairy tales *have* a history, that they are anything but ageless or timeless' (2001, 3). Fairy tales are firmly placed in the political and social mores of our time; they are not only shaped by history, they are a highly modern form. Jack Zipes points this out when he writes that fairy tales are 'a dynamic part of the historical civilizing process, with each symbolic act viewed as an intervention in socialization in the public sphere' (2006, 10). In other words, the writers of these stories – and they have authors, whether these authors are writing down oral tradition or inventing their own fairy tales – have specific motivations in mind. While the public perception of fairy tales is that they are 'universal, ageless, therapeutic, miraculous, and beautiful', and that 'it is not important to know about the mysterious past of fairy tales as long as they continue to be written' (2006, 1) the fairy tale is shaped by its history, present social mores, literary and political discourse, and the intentions of the writer. Fairy tales are no more free of this context than any other literary form. 'Writing fairy tales was [and is] a choice, an option exercised within an institution, a manner of imposing one's conversation on the prescribed fairy-tale discourse' (Zipes 2006, 4).<sup>2</sup>

Thus, when the problematic gender roles of stories first captured in print hundreds of years ago are redressed simply by recasting the central 'princess' or heroine as a stereotypical 'strong female character',<sup>3</sup> such tales fail, perhaps deliberately, to call into question the way gender politics shape the

entirety of the Western<sup>4</sup> fairy tale's structure and form. Yet in some ways this is the very point of current fairy tales. They are repeated, expected, and comforting: readers know what will happen next. Simplified forms of fairy tales thus become powerfully beloved while being powerfully hegemonic: because the gender roles of Cinderella are repeated along with the rest of the expected story, they take on a certain reality and life of their own. Thus these 'canonic' tales are comforting *because* they repeat clichéd forms of gender to us in ways that make moral, cultural, and social sense. Yet, as Maria Coppola reminds us, 'literature is seen as an interpretation of reality, and consequently, it is always political' (2001, 129). It is never more political than when the politics are invisible, expected, and excused.

In contrast to this hegemonic simplification of the fairy tale, Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch*, uses it both as commentary and as tool. While unraveling the reader's expectations about what will happen next in the tale, Donoghue unravels security blankets about femininity. She uses the fairy tale both as folklore – public property that everyone has the right to retell – and short story, an expanded artistic form that depicts more realized and realistic characters. In this wise, because of our expectations about fairy tales – for example, that the characters will exhibit certain forms of femininity, and that the tale will unfold along a familiar plot – she subverts our ideas about gender as much as she exposes the machinery of the familiar fairy-tale plot arc. Adrienne Rich writes that it is

not enough for feminist thought that specifically lesbian texts exist. Any theory or cultural/political creation that treats lesbian existence as a marginal or less 'natural' phenomenon, as mere 'sexual preference', or as the mirror image of either heterosexual or male homosexual relations is profoundly weakened thereby.

([1980] 1986, 27)

It is notable that Donoghue's stories treat women's sexuality as entirely subjective and thus without divisions between 'deviant' and 'natural' desires. Furthermore, this is not merely a 'specifically lesbian text', but one that leads the reader to question what Rich has so compellingly called the scripts of compulsory heterosexuality ([1980] 1986). Donoghue eschews expected binaries, instead complicating relationships, people, and outcomes.

In this chapter, I will examine several elements of *Kissing the Witch*. First, I will analyze the ways in which the book as a whole uses structure to comment on and undo elements of hegemonic gender/fairy tale expectations. Second, I will investigate how the book uses fantasy and our expectations of how 'magic' happens in fairy tales to reflect on gender and women's roles. Last, I will delve into some of the specifics of how Donoghue portrays women's gender identities in *Kissing the Witch*. In this volume, the fairy tale of hegemonic femininity intersects with the fairy tale itself, and Donoghue unravels them both in ways that reveal their strengths and weaknesses, encouraging us to do the same.

### Undoing isolation: the structure of *Kissing the Witch*

Even before the book is opened, *Kissing the Witch* warns the readers that the stories engage in inversion (in both the contemporary and premodern senses of the word): the witch, that old and ugly figure in most fairy tales, should be the last person to be kissed. The structure of the book holds up this reversal, as the witch of the title is the last of the Tales, emerging as a character in, appropriately, 'The Tale of the Kiss'. Yet the witch figure casts her shadow over the book as a whole, as all of the characters operate in a liminal space. All the female characters might, indeed, be the witch.

For example, the fairy godmother figure in 'The Tale of the Shoe', is described as follows: 'Her eyes had flames in their centers, and her hair was silvered with ash' (1997, 3). She is a capricious figure who could be a fairy, a witch, or Cinderella herself. Beauty, in 'The Tale of the Rose', confesses that she 'had an appetite for magic' (1997, 27); in 'The Tale of the Cottage', two children run away and are taken in by a kindly woman, who, as the tale is modeled after Hansel and Gretel, might be a witch (1997). The last tale centers on the fact that the witch is not a witch at all by choice or birth or inclination, but instead because the people around her believe she is, giving her

Power that came not from my own thin body or my own taut mind, but was invested in me by the village ... Power these scaly-fingered fishwives and their wiry husbands could have used themselves, if they'd only known how, but instead they told themselves how helpless they were, and came and laid power at my feet.

(1997, 213–214)

Thus power/magic is immanent in these stories, but it also contradicts, elides, eludes us, refusing a neat definition of what or who a witch is.

*Kissing the Witch* then also contradicts itself on another level, refusing to merely be a collection of short stories or fairy tales. Instead, the stories are linked together in a complicated network. Each story does not only lead into the next, but *implies* the next: every tale is started by the current narrator asking one of the other characters how she came to be there. This implies not simply a line of stories leading into one another, but a complicated webwork in which *every* character, no matter how minor, has her own story. For example, the horse in the tale of the goosegirl and the princess (called Falada in Grimm but unnamed by Donoghue) is asked by the goosegirl-Queen:

Who were you  
before a queen chose you as her horse?  
And the horse said,  
Will I tell you my own story?  
It is a tale of hair.

(1997, 81)

Falada, the horse of bone, was once Rapunzel, who in these tales is a blind girl living with a woman who had bought her ‘for a handful of radishes’ (1997, 84). Thus the tales are not isolated each to their own little kingdom ruled by the nobility of a protagonist supported by plebian minor characters, but exist in a larger universe where everyone, no matter how seemingly minor or servile or drudging, is the heroine of her own story. This serves to collapse the domestic walls of the fairy tale to tie them into a larger setting, perhaps implying that the network of these stories could reach as far as the reader.

Placing different tales within the same canon is not ‘traditional’ fairy-tale structure, but is common to modern retellings.<sup>5</sup> While some fairy-tale-based media use the conceit of linked and communal fairy tales emerging into the real world – most recently, the television show *Once Upon a Time* (2011–present), but also the US sitcom *The Charmings* (1987–8) and the Disney film *Enchanted* (2007) – these emergences depend on the idea that the two worlds are essentially separate and travel between them is difficult and restricted. In *Once Upon a Time*, and in *The Charmings*, the transition from the fairy-tale setting to our world is because of a curse, thus contrasting the desirable fairy-tale world with our own, undesirable one.<sup>6</sup> What makes the use of these collapsed borders different in *Kissing the Witch* is the way these borders *function*; these stories do not simply all exist together ‘somewhere else’.

In *Kissing the Witch* there is no explicit border drawn between the world of the story and our own. The prose makes the space of the story familiar. ‘The dry, liquid feel of paper under fingertips was what magic felt like’ (1997, 36) combines the magic of the fairy-tale space with a common, even prosaic object the reader is likely to be familiar with – possibly holding at that very moment. Furthermore, the protagonists do not simply all know one another somewhere else. Instead, the structure of the story depends on the premise that every single woman is the protagonist of her very own fairy tale, and the tales are endless; and because they are endless, this ‘fairy-tale land’ has no borders, or perhaps exists in a perpetual borderland. If every woman in every tale has a story, there is an implied web that reaches out forever. It may even reach to us.

### **But castles really exist: what makes fantasy**

Are fairy tales a form of fantasy in and of themselves? J.R.R. Tolkien famously thought so, defining them as

stories about Fairy, that is, *Faërie*, the realm or state in which fairies have their being. *Faërie* contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves ... when we are enchanted.

(2008, 32)<sup>7</sup>



Ursula K. Le Guin says that 'fantasy is nearer to poetry, to mysticism, and to insanity than naturalistic fiction is. It is a real wilderness, and those who go there should not feel too safe' (1979, 84). Fairy tales occur within this wilderness. At the same time, fairy tales tend to contain elements associated in contemporary fiction with the fantasy genre: magic spells, imaginary creatures, talking animals, transformations (of people and things), and settings in the past or another place. Most retellings of fairy tales place the stories squarely in the realm of fantasy: a vast majority of young adult fairy-tale fiction published since 2000 (with some exceptions focused on versions of our world or on futuristic, science fiction settings), and most films use fantastic elements. Yet, as Tolkien reminds us, it is not these 'detachable' plot elements that truly define that touch of enchantment that makes the fairy tale.

Some feminist retellings of fairy tales eschew the more fantastic elements, perhaps in order to show how embedded they are into our ordinary consciousness. One of the most famous of these is Margaret Atwood's 'Bluebeard's Egg' (1983), a short story in which a surgeon's wife must come to grips with the fact that their marriage is not what it seems. Bluebeard in this case is not a figure of exaggerated shivers, marked by obvious (possibly racialized) villainy; he is an ordinary-looking man, transforming this self-referential fairy-tale warning into a doubled or infolded story. Anne Sexton uses a different literary technique in *Transformations* (1971); like *Kissing the Witch*, she transgresses boundaries by refusing to acknowledge them. In 'The Maiden Without Hands', Sexton writes, 'All their lives they kept the silver hands, / polished daily, / a kind of purple heart, / a talisman, / a yellow star' (1971 [2001], 85). She compares the silver hands to things from our own world and our own experience. This technique, like the boundaryless stories of *Kissing the Witch*, does not relegate the fairy tale to a far-off land of story, but allows it to live and breathe in the same uneasy space as the reader. Donoghue does not use this technique precisely – none of her characters 'look like Munch's *Scream*' (Sexton 1971[2001], 108), for example – but instead she uses rich descriptions to bring the stories closer to our lives and our space.

There is very little magic in *Kissing the Witch*, if by magic one means occurrences impossible in our own world. What makes these stories more 'fantasy' than 'Bluebeard's Egg?' One element of Donoghue's writing that links her work to fantasy is the way in which these stories use magical language, particularly around women's erotic and emotional experiences.

So she came for me again just when the small sounds of mice were getting on my nerves, and she told me they were coachmen to drive us in state. She claimed her little finger was a magic wand, it could do spectacular things. She could always make me laugh.

(Donoghue 1997, 6)

This not only references older retellings of the tale (mice into coachmen), but also evokes an emotional and erotic tone, 'celebrat[ing] lesbian love as

the site of magic in the otherwise simple, ordinary, and homely world of Donoghue's tale' (Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère 2009, 21). Nothing happens that might not ordinarily happen in our world, yet the connection between women's emotions and their effect on the plot of the story suggests extra-ordinary, magical happenings.<sup>8</sup> This lyrical language explicitly connects women's emotional experiences with magical experiences: 'But the time I first bled I had a nightmare of the hunt. The wind was full of men who were also stags and also the dogs who chased them' (Donoghue 1997, 88). Here the protagonist of 'The Tale of the Hair' connects first menstruation with dreams of fairy-tale transformations, hunters turning into the hunted and men into beasts.

Furthermore, these connections are related in vivid and poetical language. If, as Tolkien implies and Le Guin openly argues, fantasy is indeed 'nearer to poetry', the very structure of *Kissing the Witch* declares it to be a work of fantasy. Each tale is framed with poetry, questions asked and answered in free verse, and the prose of the stories themselves is lyrical, self-referential, and full of evocative imagery.

Another summer in the rose garden,  
I asked  
Who were you  
before you chose a mask over a crown?  
And she said,  
Will I tell you my own story?  
It is a tale of an apple.  
(Donoghue 1997, 41)

In 'The Tale of the Apple', this narrator describes remembering her stepmother: '[she] stalked behind my eyes, growing tall or wide as I let my mind dwell on her, now smiling, now spitting, ever stretching like a shadow against a wall' (1997, 53). In the same tale, the narrator refers to housework as 'all the sorcery of fire and iron and water' (1997, 53), and remembers, 'I knew from the songs that a stepmother's smile is like a snake's' (1997, 46). Not only are the tales poetical, they are also self-referential, and full of the implied magic of transformations and sorcery, even if the reader owes these to the language of the narrator.

The setting of *Kissing the Witch* also connects it with fantasy. Where is *Kissing the Witch*? Although this question is not fully answered, the locations of the tales resonate both with the non-specific 'European' fairy-tale setting and with real, localized places where actual people live. One of the problematic aspects of *Kissing the Witch* is the way in which it is located in a 'fairy-tale' time and space common to many other modern adaptations: a pseudo-European, wholly white, largely sexist and heterosexist society.<sup>9</sup> The lack of explicit characters of color connects this retelling both to the invisible politics of modern fantasy and to the French and German tales it draws

from, queering the gender roles, but not questioning the racial hegemony of the fairy-tale mirror.

Vivid language connects that 'fairy-tale' space to our own experience. For example, the witch lives on a rocky headland, where, she says, 'I had rock to my back and the sea to my face, driftwood to burn and the odd fish to fry' (Donoghue 1997, 209). Specific elements are placed within the fairy tale setting; although this place feels the 'wind of *Faërie*' as defined by Tolkien, that wind is blowing across concrete objects and people. This use of the 'fairy-tale past' that has never really existed thus comments on its very non-existence; by placing vivid, realized characters within the setting, by adding details such as 'my mouth was full of apple, slippery, still hard, vinegary at the edges' (1997, 58) Donoghue points out the ways in which blank 'fairy-tale space' is essentially a space on which a story is written. It is a fantasy in both senses: a genre and a space to work out desires.

Furthermore, these stories are *recursive* and already known to the characters: the fairy-tale shape is a visible narrative force. In 'The Tale of the Shoe', the protagonist says, 'And then, because I asked, she took me to the ball. Isn't that what girls are meant to ask for?' (1997, 3). This comments both on the plot of the fairy tale and the 'plot' of gender. Coppola notes that this protagonist is 'an informed reader: she knows how "Cinderella" or the fairy tale "woman" should behave and she tries to conform to this model' (2001, 135). De la Rochere interprets this as form of re-writing, of 'enact[ing] the creative process as the re-making of stories from old material, implying that all writing is rewriting' (2009, 16). Such rewriting takes place in both the blank 'fairy-tale space' where we write our desires/fantasy, and in the mental space where we mirror the lives of real people. Donoghue merges both of these in the space of her stories, again refusing to dichotomize, but shifting between identities.

Focusing on knowledge of the fairy tale itself makes this fantasy space doubly familiar to the reader and doubly visible. De la Rochere emphasizes the importance of the act of speech, noting that the Cinderella-like protagonist in 'The Tale of the Shoe' is identified with the bad sister in 'Toads and Diamonds', when she confesses, 'Every word that came out of my mouth limped like a toad' (Donoghue 1997, 1). This not only signals 'the girl's disgust with and rejection of language as something alien and abject' but also 'her capacity to identify not merely with a positive fairy tale heroine, but with her negative double' (de la Rochere 2009, 18). This ability to identify is what helps break down the restrictive plot of the fairy tale into something more complex so the characters can enact a wider range of possibilities. The Cinderella figure, that quintessential bastion of femininity and good, is introduced as identifying with the bad, evil sister. This is not a story that adheres to the neat binaries of fairy tales – de la Rochere notes, in fact, that

this insistence on the changeability of roles, situations, and identifications, ties in with the systematic challenge of binary oppositions (male

and female, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, normal and deviant, etc.) in the volume as an enactment of 'queerness' understood as the potential for metamorphosis and self-transformation.

(2009, 18)

This 'queerness' goes beyond the fact that this particular tale tells a story of love between women; it is self-referential, undoing of expected opposites, portraying self-aware characters who move towards further self-knowing. Knowledge/language is the key by which our protagonist *recognizes* the story she is in, recognizes what is expected of her, and then recognizes her true desires outside of that inscribed story. Thus the genre-fantasy of the fairy tale is transformed into a space for desire-fantasy in which the heroine can write (or rewrite) her own true wishes.

### **The tale of the women: fairy tales and femininities**

Before I turn to discussing fairy tales in general, I would like to continue a little with 'The Tale of the Shoe'. What makes this tale such a challenge to the way fairy tales have historically constrained gender roles for women is the way in which it allows the protagonist, through her own knowledge of how the tale is *supposed to go*, to elude the script. The story ends with the protagonist listening to the prince propose marriage: 'The voices were shrieking, Yes yes yes say yes before you lose your chance you bag of nothingness,' and she reacts: 'I leapt backwards down the steps, leaving one shoe behind' (Donoghue 1997, 7). Thus far, the story is still on the path: the good Cinderella flees the Prince – leaving behind the necessary clue to her identity – and lets him pursue. But suddenly, the story plunges into the woods as the protagonist returns to her godmother and realizes, 'I had got the story all wrong. How could I not have noticed she was beautiful?' (1997, 7). If the Cinderella figure had fallen for a female prince, had been rescued from an evil stepmother instead of her own depression, and had been uplifted from poverty to wealth in the story, this tale would not be as truly revolutionary and, indeed, queer, as Donoghue's is. The simple insertion of a lesbian love story is not enough; as Donoghue allows her characters to unravel these stories from their roots, and weave them anew, the restrictions of the plot itself are revealed. She allows her characters to reconstruct the story itself, not merely to shift from one fixed role to another.

Focus on female characters is permitted in contemporary fairy tales: although traditional folk and fairy tales in the Western tradition do not necessarily focus on female characters, it is the few named female protagonists we remember, rather than the multitude of (largely unnamed) male protagonists, as Maria Tatar notes (1987, 85). This is notable in English-language fiction, where focus on female main characters and female concerns is still 'niche' and not mainstream. As Joanna Russ first observed in 1972, but which is still apparent today,

the faithful wife, the beautiful temptress, the seductive destroyer, the devouring momma, the healing Madonna – none of these are persons in the sense that a novel's protagonist must be a person, and none is of the slightest use to the woman writer who wishes to write about a female protagonist.

([1972] 1995, 82)

The modern fairy tale, however, is culturally feminine and thus a space welcoming to female concerns. This makes Donoghue's use of the space to explore queer sexuality and alternate gender roles particularly apt yet also revolutionary.

On the other hand, the structure of the fairy tale is confining. It is not simply the gender roles espoused in the 'traditional'<sup>10</sup> canon that are problematic; it is the setup and assumptions of the plots themselves. Sherry Ortner argues that female characters in Grimm are '*made* to be passive, weak, and timorous, that is, [there is] a recognition that agency in girls had to be *unmade*' (1996, 9). The idea that women have agency but that it must be '*unmade*' is interesting; there is a subtle acknowledgment that gender roles are not in and of themselves natural but must be *taught*. If this is so, we can teach different ones. Donoghue uses the confining nature of the fairy tale to illustrate the limits of those confines, as other feminist writers have done before her, but also to push both the fairy-tale and gender roles into new creative directions. In 'The Tale of the Shoe', Donoghue rejects not only the heterosexual pairing with the prince, but the entire premise of the 'Cinderella class-uplift'; instead of marrying up, her protagonist returns: 'So then she took me home, or I took her home, or we were both somehow taken to the closest thing' (Donoghue 1997, 8).

This theme of unraveling or contradicting expected endings continues throughout the book. In 'The Tale of the Apple', in which Donoghue rewrites the tale of Snow White, the story begins with the expected conflict between the young queen and the old one: 'she kissed me and spoke sweetly in front of the whole court, but I could tell she would be my enemy. There was only room for one queen in a castle' (1997, 45). Rowe notes that such tales promote conflict between women on the basis that women's power rests on their male-identified sexual attraction: 'for the aging stepmother, the young girl's maturation signals her own waning sexual attractiveness and control' ([1978] 1987, 212). Yet Donoghue does not let the conflict remain simple; the stepmother pursues the girl not out of malice but because 'I haven't had a night's sleep since you left, she said; it feels like dancing in shoes of red-hot iron'<sup>11</sup> (Donoghue 1997, 55–56). The young princess/queen returns to her, and asks her what she was before she married her father, which elicits 'The Tale of the Handkerchief' (1997, 59), in which the goose girl and the princess change places for good. This tale implies people are not born into their roles, as many fairy tales would have us believe: the youngest who always succeeds; the princess who will be found out among the kitchen servants. The roles of the fairy tale are revealed as constructed instead of inherent.

These roles as set out by the fairy tale have historically been highly limiting for women and girls. Zipes notes that, over time, the versions of fairy tales accepted as 'canon' or 'traditional' have largely been recorded or written by men, and this influence has shaped the gender roles in the stories (1987). His extensive study on Little Red Riding Hood/Little Red-Cap demonstrates a shift from an agential female protagonist who escapes, to a story 'which reflects general male attitudes about women portrayed as eager to be seduced or raped' (1987, 229).<sup>12</sup>

Even modern retellings of fairy tales can be unconsciously limiting, particularly in the use of beauty. Although this is a point that has been criticized for decades,<sup>13</sup> modern retellings often focus on beauty as a necessary adjunct to feminine accomplishment, or even the very plot of the stories. In Robin McKinley's adaptation of 'Donkeyskin', *Deerskin*, everyone exclaims, 'How beautiful she is!' when she attends her first ball and her father first 'sees' her (1993, 53). This follows the plot of the Grimm brothers' version, which alleges that it is the princess's beauty that causes her father to want to 'marry' her; however, as the beauty of children is not to blame for adults wishing to sexually abuse them, this detail is not a necessary adjunct to the story. In Tanith Lee's retelling of 'Little Red Riding Hood', 'Wolfland', the main character, Lisel, is described in the very first paragraph as 'a vivid blonde in the flame-bright ballrooms, breaking hearts and not minding' (1983, 106) despite the fact that the story hinges on lycanthropy and not romance. Furthermore, most of these tales also focus on the accomplishment of heterosexual mating as both the traditional marker of female adulthood and as the sigil that marks feminine happiness. A good example of this is the film *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* in which the main character, despite reading books not yet published (*Utopia*), meeting time travelers (Leonardo da Vinci), and rescuing the prince from bandits with inexplicably acquired sword skills, cannot find happiness until she marries that same and literal prince ([1998] 2002). Donoghue not only eschews both these aspects of the map, but openly questions what these instructions mean through clever undoings and reversals.

Donoghue also offers ways out of the limits imposed by this constrained map. Joanna Russ suggests that there are 'two alternatives open to the woman author who no longer cares about How She Fell in Love or How She Went Mad. These are (1) lyricism and (2) life' ([1972] 1995, 87). Russ looks to science fiction in her essay as a place to create new myths which 'are not stories about men *qua* Man and women *qua* Woman: they are myths of human intelligence and human adaptability' ([1972] 1995, 91). Donoghue has cleverly done the inverse: taken old tales, already about women, and twisted them to tell stories they were never originally intended to tell.

Donoghue's Little Mermaid figure in 'The Tale of the Voice' 'gets' her prince, but, as the witch predicts, there is 'pain' (1997, 193) rather than joy. Achieving the heterosexual pairing signifies neither adulthood nor fulfillment for this character, but instead shows how empty such relationships based on

beauty can be. After the narrator catches her 'prince' with another woman, she reflects, 'How should I blame him? How was he to know what mattered to me? Perhaps we get, not what we deserve, but what we demand. His sweet dumb little foundling asked so little of him, and that little was so easy for the flesh to give, why should she get anything more?' (1997, 200). In this tale, the fisher-girl/mermaid's loss of her voice is not through the witch's intervention, but entirely her own doing: 'Your silence was the cost of what you sought, she said: it had nothing to do with me. What would I do with your voice? The music you make has always been in your own power' (1997, 203). Linking the desire to reshape one's self for the love of another with the loss of voice, and that loss of voice with loss of agency and the inability to gain a fulfilling relationship, provides a gloss on the sacrifice of the Little Mermaid tales that is both explicitly feminist and also a criticism of such role models for women. This mermaid/fisher-girl leaves her unfaithful prince, and in the end, she says 'I married a fisherman with green eyes who liked to hear me sing, but preferred to hear me talk' (1997, 204). This second relationship is based on open speech and communication, the opposite of the Little Mermaid's original sacrificial/penitential love. It is also a relationship with another of the fisher-folk, eschewing the idea that happiness comes through increasing one's social status (marrying up/marrying a 'prince'). Lastly, it acknowledges that love is not singular and that it is possible to experience falling in love more than once in a lifetime.

Donoghue is particularly good at undoing the 'rescue' narrative in these tales. In 'The Tale of the Skin', her retelling of 'Donkeyskin/Allerleirauh', the princess is helped, but not rescued, by an old woman. When she is in another kingdom, disguised by dirt and a donkeyskin, the prince cannot recognize the beauty of the ballroom under her disguise: 'Was he drugged, that he couldn't hear my heart calling out to his? Surely he would know me all at once, any minute now' (1997, 161–2). When he cannot see her, she reacts thus: 'My ring I dropped in the royal soup bowl for him to choke on. The gold and silver and starry dresses I left scattered by the river; let him think his lost beauty drowned. The donkey skin I pulled tightly around me as I set out for home' (1997, 162). There is no rescue in falling in love; this needs to be a meeting of equals and he cannot recognize her.

If he guessed his mistake, if he wanted me back, I thought, let him suffer and work for it as I had worked and suffered. Let him follow me over a mountain of iron and a lake of glass, and wear out three swords in my defense. But at my truest, lying awake trying to count the stars, I knew my prince would not follow.

(1997, 163)

The princess of this story realizes the way she has been made to 'suffer and work' for her reward and, in a meeting of equals, her partner will also have worked and suffered. This serves as a fairy-tale allegory for the emotional



work of relationships, and in rejecting a relationship where she does all the work and suffering, this Donkeyskin proves that she is, indeed, no ass.

In 'The Tale of the Rose', the poetic ending can be read to suggest that within lesbian relationships gender roles are both relevant *and* irrelevant, a shifting signifier: 'And as the years flowed by, some villagers told travelers of a beast and a beauty who live in the castle and could be seen walking on the battlements, and others told of two beauties, and others, of two beasts' (1997, 40). 'Beauties' can be read as femmes/feminine gender, and 'beasts' as butches/masculine gender, such pairings transgress heteronormative gender roles doubly; but this is not, of course, the only reading. The shifting signifiers also show that both the women of the castle can take on both/any roles. At the same time, 'beast' is also *any* woman who transgresses gender norms; 'beast' is anyone who is not beautiful, who is not obedient, and who is not heterosexual – a rewriting of the original 'beast' who threatened the feminine with violence from the outside, this beast 'threatens' (with difference or change) from the inside. Like the witch of the title, *all* the women of these stories are potential beasts.

The witch/beast emerges strongly in Donoghue's retelling of Rapunzel, 'The Tale of the Hair'. This story is particularly significant, as Donoghue may be writing at least partly in response to Anne Sexton's *Transformations*, in which Rapunzel is a lesbian tragedy. However, in Sexton's version, the young Rapunzel runs away with the prince, thus reinforcing heteronormativity and the narrative of lesbian loneliness/deviance.

The world, some say,  
is made up of couples.  
A rose must have a stem.  
As for Mother Gothel,  
her heart shrank to the size of a pin,  
never again to say: Hold me, my young dear,  
hold me,  
and only as she dreamt of yellow hair  
did moonlight sift into her mouth.

(Sexton [1971] 2001, 42)

In Donoghue's story, there is no prince that steals the blind girl/Rapunzel away: 'She guided my hand over the pieces of horn, common horn. The horn was mine, she said. I knew I would have no peace until I found you a prince. As she spoke, her whisper deepened into a hoarse, musical voice, a voice I knew' (1997, 96). The Rapunzel-figure is angry: 'I pulled back and threw the sharp fragments in her face, calling her witch, monster, carrion' (1997, 96). She then cuts her hair and uses it to escape the tower she has locked herself into, yet afterward returns to find her guardian, who has blinded herself: 'I took her head on my chest and wept over her, salt in her wounded eyes. It was the only way I knew to clean them. I didn't know whether they would heal, or whether

she would have to learn the world from me now. We lay there, waiting to see what we would see' (1997, 99). Instead of losing their mutual love, the two of them must now 'see' a new way of living together without the illusion of a prince – at least, without a prince who is not *also* Rapunzel's guardian-witch. In this tale, blindness/seeing becomes a powerful symbol for perceiving both the self and the relation of the self to others and a larger world. In contrast to Sexton's tragedy and reinforcement of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich [1980] 1986), this story suggests the possibility of love between two people that is not dependent on societal ideas about femininity or masculinity. The tale hints at the trope of deception in transgender narratives – what if the witch figure is really a prince? What if 'she' really has a male self? It also embraces the ways in which those born as (or diagnosed as or living as) women can choose to shift their gender for multitudes of reasons, as well as how 'femininity' can choose a wide array of gender performances.

The positioning of fairy tales within contemporary culture as 'feminine' gives Donoghue leeway to redefine what 'feminine' means. Lulled by 'once upon a time', readers do not expect the landscape to contain the unfamiliar monsters of women who do not perform within gender limits. In 'The Tale of the Brother', Donoghue merges two famous Andersen stories ('The Snow Queen' and 'The Red Shoes') to give us a portrait of a very unconventional protagonist. The tale begins with 'I have never been content to be nothing but a girl' (1997, 103), and continues not only with her attachment to her brother but her dream of being like him, of *replacing* him:

I loved my brother, but sometimes I used to dream that when I woke up he would have been taken away without a trace. On that imagined morning, when I looked into the splinter of mirror over the hearth I would see his face in place of mine. Snow would be impatient outside the window like a dancer flinging off her veils. The old people would call me by my brother's name, let me tie his skates on, and send me to the river with all the other boys. On that day, nothing and no one would stop me from skimming through the swarm of snow bees.

The day my brother was indeed taken away, I knew it was my fault for dreaming it.

(1997, 104)

This passage demonstrates the complex relationship between the protagonist and gender: she dreams of having the privileges of being a boy, but must replace her brother to do so; thus she is guilty when her brother disappears, a monstrous creature. Her envy of his freedom or his gender role, which seems to be a limited good – after all, it is not offered to girls – leads to the illusion that she can have it only by replacing him. Yet, as an affectionate sister, she also must rescue him or revenge his theft.

When she sets off to find him with her new red shoes – those shoes that in another story would be dancing her to death for daring to want to dance at

all – ‘no one followed’ (1997, 108). She describes herself as ‘more like a bear cub than an ice maiden’ (1997, 111), reminding us about her unconventional gender presentation. In the end, when she finds the woman who has stolen her brother, another female character who is not conventionally feminine, ‘lean, knowledgeable, too cold to need beauty’ (1997, 106), she first demands, ‘Take my red shoes, I shouted, but give me back my brother.’ And then she cries: ‘Why him, I howled like a baby. Why him and not me?’ (1997, 113). Indeed, why her brother and not her? Why is she not worth stealing? Why is she not allowed the silver skates, the freedom, the gender role she wants to have?

‘She opened her arms as wide as they would go and said, Come in, come in’ (1997, 114). By ending the tale with the acceptance of a protagonist who wants to be a female brother, Donoghue expands gender horizons once again. Both the conflict in this story and the resolution illustrate how actual girls have a wide range of gender behaviors. Furthermore, the ending valorizes behavior that is not limited to conventional models of femininity – or even, perhaps, femininity at all.

### **Conclusion: two beauties, or two beasts**

Using these intertwined tales, Emma Donoghue opens up gender possibilities for all her readers. The characters – who are never named, who speak their own stories but who exist in a liminal, unidentified space where the stories are recognizable and also vividly individual – move easily between the also often nameless, coarsely drawn figures of fairy tales and living, breathing people. By showing how these characters are knowingly constructing their stories, with knowledge of how their ‘plots’ (both story and gender) are ‘supposed’ to go, Donoghue leads readers to consider how gender constructs the lives of men and women. By connecting the stories together in such a way that every woman is the protagonist of her own fairy tale, she suggests how connected story is to culture, and how readers can view themselves through the lens of story. And, by allowing her characters to deconstruct the limits of gender, whether it is through rejection of plot or the performance of liminality, shifting between the princess and the witch, the beauty and the beast, she uses the compelling language of fantasy and the fairy tale to suggest that people need not adhere to binaries, but need to acquire language, sight, and the ability to spin their own tales. Donoghue demonstrates that one can use the fantasy-space of the fairy tale to expand, rather than restrict, gender horizons.

### **Notes**

- 1 A comprehensive list is not possible, but some examples beyond Disney include: Robin McKinley’s several fairy-tale based novels, including *Deerskin* (1993), a retelling of ‘Donkeyskin’; *The Red Shoes* (1948), a film about ballet based on the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale of the same name; *Once Upon a Time*, an American fairy-tale-based (mostly Germanic/French in origin) television series

- first airing in 2011 and still running as of this writing; *Castle Waiting* by Linda Medley, a comic book series that adapts a number of fairy-tale themes; and Dina Goldstein's 'Fallen Princesses' 2009 painting series.
- 2 For more on the history of the fairy tale, see Harris (2001); Tatar (1987); and Zipes ([1983] 1991).
- 3 Sophia McDougall, in her controversial 2013 article 'I Hate Strong Female Characters', points out that the 'strong female character' trope is a 'limited box' that is both "an idealised power fantasy" and short-cut stereotype that grants writers indulgences for not writing women as fully realized people. 'Of course, *normal* women are weak and boring and can't do anything worthwhile. But *this* one is different. She is strong! See, she roundhouses people in the face' (McDougall 2013).
- 4 Despite the problems of this term, it serves to locate a particular fairy-tale tradition that is largely focused on the Germanic and French tradition (with some input from the Danish and other North countries via Hans Christiann Andersen, and some of the British Isles stories via Yeats). Although some Russian folk tales (and, less often, Hungarian or other Eastern European stories) are also admitted to this canon, the stories are usually from Western and Northern Europe.
- 5 For example, the Disney Princess website <http://princess.disney.com/>, which features art, games, short films, and interactive media that depict the princesses together in an imagined mutual space. Fan imagination also places the Disney Princesses together, such as in the Pocket Princesses comic [amymebberson.tumblr.com](http://amymebberson.tumblr.com), where they routinely interact (Mebberson n.d.).
- 6 In *Enchanted*, the transition is made through 'exile' via a sewer grating, also emphasizing the undesirable (and unsanitary) aspects of our own world (or, at least, our own world as depicted in film).
- 7 He famously limited this view, excluding 'traveler's tales' (2008, 34), 'dream-stories' ([1947] 2008, 35), and 'beast-fables' ([1947] 2008, 36), but whether Tolkien's 'fairy-stories' and our modern idea of 'fairy tales' are entirely congruent or not is another essay for another time.
- 8 This is fascinatingly similar to some forms of magical realism: see, for example, *Like Water for Chocolate*, by Laura Esquivel, in which the love-longing of a spinster forced to bake the wedding cake for her lover caused 'a strange intoxication – an acute attack of pain and frustration – that seized the guests and scattered them across the patio and the grounds and the bathrooms, all of them wailing over lost love' (Esquivel 1989, 39). In this novel, the fantastical/magical elements also allow for considerable gender flexibility: Tita (the main character) 'penetrates' her lover through food (1989, 52) and her sister Gertrudis becomes a general in the rebel army.
- 9 Notable exceptions include *Cinder*, by Marissa Meyer (2013), a science fiction version of Cinderella located in a culture populated with Asian people (problematically, the main character is white); Malinda Lo's *Ash* (2010), another retelling of Cinderella focusing on a queer protagonist; Adeline Yen Ma's *Chinese Cinderella* (1999), an autobiography meant for young adult readers (again) framed around the Cinderella story; and Nalo Hopkinson's *Skin Folk* (2001), a collection of short stories that includes several retellings of folk and fairy tales, including 'The Glass Bottle Trick', a Caribbean version of 'Bluebeard'. These are not, by any means, all the exceptions!
- 10 There is not room in this chapter to unpack all of the problematics of the term 'traditional', so I can merely footnote that I am aware that what is 'traditional' is constantly made or decided on, and deciding what is traditional is an act of power.
- 11 Donoghue constantly makes direct literary references (like this one to the Grimm version, 'Snow-Drop') to other versions of the fairy tales, thus contextualizing their literary history and the knowledge her narrators have of their own stories.

- 12 Lest one think that such attitudes in fairy-tale authors are limited to Perrault and the brothers Grimm, there are plenty of modern examples with surprisingly archaic ideas about women's roles and sexuality. For example, in Gregory Frost's retelling of Bluebeard/Fitcher's Bird, *Fitcher's Brides*, it is the youngest daughter – the only *virgin* – who overcomes the evil of the charismatic preacher who takes the role of Bluebeard in the story (2003).
- 13 See Leiberman (1987) and Rowe ([1978] 1987).

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