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‘Why must I truncate myself in order to please you?’: Othering and Queering in Depictions of Non-Binary Gender in Pseudo-Medieval Fantasy Literature, 1990-2017

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PhD

2022

‘Why must I truncate myself in order to please you?’: Othering and Queering in Depictions of Non-Binary Gender in Pseudo-Medieval Fantasy Literature, 1990-2017

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Northumbria at Newcastle for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

In the twenty-first century, questions of representation in fiction have become mainstream alongside the rise in popularity of fantasy literature and its various adaptations. Non-binary gender is rarely and unrealistically represented in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature in the twentieth century, as characters are often deeply Othered and framed as the monstrous. My thesis examines how queer theory in the late twentieth century and the developing interest in queer representation in the twenty-first century has impacted the genre going forward.

I initially examine the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre as a whole, selecting representative example texts and analysing each non-binary character's depiction in light of the Other, expressions of transphobia, the monstrous, and Judith Butler's discussion of cultural intelligibility. I address these texts chronologically in order to explore how the genre's depictions of non-binary gender have changed from 1990 to 2017. I then go on to examine Beloved, a character from Robin Hobb's 'Realm of the Elderlings' series, as a case study. Beloved's depiction marks a significant departure from other non-binary characters in the 1990s when the series began, and develops across the series' 1995-2017 span. This section of the thesis discusses the queering of the cisgender gaze and the possibility of emerging from a transphobic and cisnormative framework as demonstrated by the text.

By analysing the shift in depictions of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature from the purely monstrous and the Other to more varied depictions that equalise them with their cisgender equivalents, I demonstrate the impact of evolving understandings of queerness and the various movements for transgender and non-binary rights and awareness in the USA and the UK on a genre that is central to contemporary storytelling.

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Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this commentary has been approved.

Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee on 2nd October 2015.

I declare that the Word Count of this thesis is 76,083.

Hazel Impey

22 April 2022

Introduction: Modes of Inclusion

You know more of the whole of me than any other person who breathes, yet you persist in insisting that all of that cannot be me. What would you have me cut off and leave behind? And why must I truncate myself in order to please you?¹

In these two simple questions, an entire set of cultural norms is turned on its head. Not only is there a non-binary character present, but they are claiming their right to be accepted as a whole person in direct defiance of the cisnormativity of their community. *Beloved*, of Robin Hobb's 'Realm of the Elderlings' series, is a markedly unusual character – and not just within the text itself, but in the wider genre to which it belongs.

Non-binary gender is rarely and unrealistically represented in the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre; Robin Hobb's *Beloved* is both a noteworthy exception and an early indicator of the general slow movement of the genre towards greater queer inclusivity. The shift in depictions of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature (from the purely monstrous and the Other to more varied depictions that equalise them with their cisgender equivalents) echoes the various movements for transgender and non-binary rights/awareness that have built momentum in the US and UK from the 1980s to the present day.

Pseudo-medieval fantasy literature is not a genre known for its diversity. Indeed, its reputation is rather conservative, as discussed below. Widely agreed to begin with J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* in 1954-55, the hallmarks of the genre referred to sometimes as *epic fantasy* or *swords-and-sorcery* are magic and a pseudo-medieval setting. The last twenty years have seen a rise in the genre's popularity, particularly surrounding the television adaptation of George R. R. Martin's 'A Song of Ice and Fire'. Non-binary gender is a concept

¹ Robin Hobb, *The Golden Fool* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 403-4.

that has only risen to greater public attention in Western culture in the twenty-first century, but has its roots in a number of much older understandings of gender. It has been explored through queer theory and transgender studies, and non-binary characters in fiction, while still not numerous, are growing more common.

Part of the movement for non-binary rights and awareness has surrounded the representation of non-binary gender in fictional work; and with the greater attention garnered by the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre around the same time, it is unsurprising to see that depictions of non-binary gender in the genre have shifted drastically in the 1990-2017 time period that this thesis focuses on.

There are three primary components to my introduction. Firstly, a discussion of the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre, which includes my working definition of it. Secondly, a brief discussion of the gender and sexuality research that will be relevant, which will establish the vocabulary, definitions, and theoretical contexts that apply in this thesis. Thirdly and finally, a brief overview of how these two topics interact, and a description of the running order of the rest of the thesis.

Introducing the Genre

Genres of fiction are not often strictly defined – it might be more accurate to consider them as points on a scale, fading into the other genres at different points, as different pieces of literature try different combinations and styles. However, for the purposes of this thesis, I will be using a definition of pseudo-medieval fantasy that draws on common elements of the genre in order to limit the scope of my analysis to an achievable range. The two key elements I will use for my definition are magic and a pseudo-medieval setting.

Magic is the most straightforward part. The texts I am discussing all include magic, whether in the form of a complex and strictly defined magic system (as in Peter V. Brett's 'Demon Cycle' books), a vaguer and more open-ended concept (as in William Nicholson's *Firesong*), or a combination of the two (as in Robin Hobb's 'Realm of the Elderlings' series).

The pseudo-medieval setting is the more complex part of the definition for several reasons. Firstly, texts in the genre are not frequently set in an actual historical period, but rather a fictional place and/or time period in which the level of technology and style of civilisation are approximately "medieval". Secondly, "medieval" as a historical time period is extremely broad; *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages* describes it as being from c. 500 to c. 1500.² Thirdly, a pseudo-medieval setting may blend elements from different cultures and different time periods. All together, the "medieval" setting of a fantasy text will typically be drawn more from popular concepts about the medieval period than from actual historical research, something I will discuss further below.

Due to this, pseudo-medieval fantasy fiction is a somewhat nebulous category. After my initial work reading a wide selection of the genre (see appendix A), I have decided to characterise it based on several common elements. This has resulted in a simplified definition, but one effective for the necessarily limited range of this thesis. As defined in this thesis, "medieval" as used in reference to the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre usually incorporates the following: travel being primarily on foot or by horse; weapons typically

² *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. by Robert E. Bjork (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198662624.001.0001/acref-9780198662624>> [accessed 08 November 2022].

including bows, swords, spears, and axes, and excluding firearms; an aristocratic class with significant societal or political power; a lack of significant heavy industry; no electronics.

There are two other aspects of the work I am engaging with that are worth mentioning here. Firstly, while my primary focus is on adult fantasy fiction, I have included fantasy marketed towards teenagers in the scope of my research. Although the two categories are marketed differently and often written to different standards (length, content), the number of pre-2017 texts including non-binary characters is very small and both categories of fiction share audiences, making it logical to include both.

Secondly, the time period that I am covering is 1990-2017. This was chosen in order to properly contextualise Robin Hobb's 'Realm of the Elderlings' series (1995-2017), which is the central case study of this thesis. It was also chosen to reflect the shifts in queer rights movements (particularly for transgender and non-binary people) over that time period, which I discuss below, and in acknowledgement of the upswing in popularity of the genre during that period often attributed to the successes of the film adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) and the television adaptation of George R. R. Martin's 'A Song of Ice and Fire' (2011-2019).

With all those elements considered, my primary texts are as follows:

'Realm of the Elderlings' by Robin Hobb (1995-2017)

The Eye of the World by Robert Jordan (1990)

'A Song of Ice and Fire' by George R. R. Martin (1996-present)

The 'Mask of Shadows' duology by Linsey Miller (2017-2018)

Firesong by William Nicholson (2003)

‘The Inheritance Cycle’ by Christopher Paolini (2001-2011)

Of Dragons and Bigotry

Despite the popularity and size of the fantasy genre, the most recognisable image of the type of fictional world it depicts remains largely white, patriarchal, and heterosexual. Pseudo-medieval fantasy in particular often carries with it a set of assumptions and standard formats, and these include the minimisation of non-male characters, and the minimisation or complete absence of non-white, non-heterosexual characters, and non-patriarchal societies. In this section I discuss this element of pseudo-medieval fantasy, exploring how though the proliferation of patriarchal secondary worlds is frequently attributed, by its defenders, to a desire for perceived “historical realism”, and is the subject of much contention.

These trends are reflected in the many articles and discussions by both critics and creators. Related statistics that are available include reports such as the one by speculative fiction magazine *Strange Horizons* on the gender and race of authors of science fiction and fantasy who are prominently reviewed (and of their reviewers).³ Since spring 2014 there has also been We Need Diverse Books, a grassroots organisation which focuses on diversity (of race, gender, sexuality, religion, etc.) in young adult literature (across all genres).⁴ In terms of the above-mentioned projects, while the *Strange Horizons* reports focus on the race and gender of the authors and reviewers, and We Need Diverse Books on the primary and secondary characters and their presentation, another aspect of the discussion surrounds the repetitive use of patriarchal societies. One series that has given rise to considerable comment on this subject in the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre is George R.R. Martin’s ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’

³ Strange Horizons, *The 2014 SF Count* (2015), <<http://www.strangehorizons.com/2015/20150330/sfcount-a.shtml>> [accessed 05 April 2015].

⁴ We Need Diverse Books, *We Need Diverse Books Homepage* (2014), <<http://weneeddiversebooks.org/>> [accessed 18 April 2015].

series. Although Martin's books have featured multiple female characters they are still outnumbered by the male characters (nine female point of view characters with 140 chapters between them against twenty-two male point of view characters with 204 chapters between them in the five novels released to date), and the constant barrage of sexism and misogyny in the text is often defended as either realistic, normal for the genre, or both. For example, Helen Young found that debates in a prominent community space for fans of the series (*Westeros.org*) demonstrate that many fans 'do not find the presence of sexism in Martin's world problematic – although it is often dismissed or justified as one on the grounds of historical accuracy'.⁵ 'A Song of Ice and Fire' has provoked much discussion around the difference between depicting misogyny and condoning misogyny, and which of these is occurring in the series. This discussion is found in both informal and more academic contexts. In an informal article for *Buzzfeed*, Kate Aurthur argues that '*Game of Thrones*'s softcore diversions prevent viewers from noticing how feminist the show often is'.⁶ Rhiannon Thomas, writing for *Femimist Fiction*, stated that a 'series is not misogynistic simply because it presents and explores a highly misogynistic world'.⁷ In contrast, Rebekah Owen, writing for *the F word*, contends that the 'entire *Game of Thrones* franchise, whether in print or broadcast, represents that most insidious of all fantasies: the subjugation of women'.⁸ In a more academic context, Joseph Young argues that the violence of Martin's work (of varying

⁵ Helen Young, 'Race in online fantasy fandom: whiteness on *Westeros.org*', *Continuum*, 28:5 (2014), 737-747 (p. 740) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2014.941331>>.

⁶ Kate Aurthur, '9 Ways "Game of Thrones" Is Actually Feminist', *Buzzfeed*, 17 April 2013. <<http://www.buzzfeed.com/kateaurthur/9-ways-game-of-thrones-is-actually-feminist#.lemJlaBk>> [accessed 13 April 2022] (para. 7 of 21).

⁷ Rhiannon Thomas, *A Song of Ice and Fire: Misogynistic or Feminist?* (2012), <<https://www.rhiannonkthomas.com/blog/2012/06/22/a-song-of-ice-and-fire-misogynistic-or-feminist>> [accessed 13 April 2022] (para. 2 of 8).

⁸ Rebekah Owens, 'A Fantasy of Female Subjugation', *the F word*, 27 December 2013, <http://www.thefword.org.uk/reviews/2013/12/game_of_thrones_subjugation> [accessed 13 April 2022] (para. 7 of 16).

kinds, including misogyny) is present because Martin is in fact critiquing it.⁹ Debra Ferreday, in turn, discusses the series' interaction with rape culture from multiple angles.¹⁰

The normality and frequency of patriarchal (and normally demonstrably misogynistic to varying degrees) societies in fantasy literature, particularly in pseudo-medieval fantasy, is often attributed to traditionalism and so-called "realism". The argument of traditionalism refers to the significance of what is often considered to be the genre's founding text: J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Many pseudo-medieval and epic fantasy texts draw on elements of Tolkien's work, which depicts a white, patriarchal, heterosexual world, something that has been analysed at length. Irina Rupp Malone, for example, discusses at length the ways in which '*The Lord of the Rings* and the works that it has influenced have been accused of racialism, totalitarianism, and chauvinism', as well as how these arguments are sometimes countered.¹¹ The "realism" argument is the more contentious and continues to be discussed at length. It is often framed as a concern for accurate depictions of the medieval world, but this is disputed. Dan Wohl's 2012 informal article 'Is "Historical Accuracy" a Good Defense of Patriarchal Societies in Fantasy Fiction?' describes the argument as being that '[s]exism in (to pick the most obvious example) medieval fantasy is okay or even desirable, the thinking goes, because in the real European Middle Ages sexism was the status quo'.¹² This is an argument that can be rebuffed on two counts. Firstly, texts in the fantasy

⁹ Joseph Young, "'Enough About Whores": Sexual Characterization In A Song Of Ice And Fire', *Mythlore*, 35.130 (2017), 45-61 <<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/enough-about-whores-sexual-characterization-song/docview/1898009266/se-2?accountid=12860>> [accessed 28 October 2021].

¹⁰ Debra Ferreday, 'Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 30.83 (2015), 21-36 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2014.998453>>.

¹¹ Irina Rupp Malone, 'What's Wrong With Medievalism? Tolkien, the Strugatsky Brothers, and the Question of the Ideology of Fantasy', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 27.2 (2016), 204-224, (p. 219) <<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/whats-wrong-with-medievalism-tolkien-strugatsky/docview/1933850233/se-2?accountid=12860>> [accessed 28 October 2021].

¹² Dan Wohl, 'Is "Historical Accuracy" a Good Defense of Patriarchal Societies in Fantasy Fiction?' *The Mary Sue*, 5 December 2012. <<http://www.themarysue.com/sexism-in-historical-fantasy/>> [accessed 05 April 2015] (para. 2 of 19).

genre typically depict not an authentic medieval environment but a pseudo-medieval fantasy world bearing only some similarities to any actual historical era – see Zita Eva Roh and Lisa Benz for a more detailed analysis.¹³ It then becomes clear that an authorial decision has been made to disregard certain aspects of the medieval world deemed undesirable or inappropriate (such as its lack of magical creatures) and retain others deemed desirable or appropriate (the architecture, the clothing, and, evidently, the bigotry). This decision does not result in a realistic portrayal of medieval life, but instead a version which falls in line with the expectations of the genre. It is further argued by Peter Hunt in his introductory discussion of fantasy that the genre’s ‘tendency to exploit medieval settings [...] suggests a regressive element, a romantic yearning (by adults) for earlier ‘innocence’, for an alternative world where motivations, actions, needs and gratifications are simpler and more direct than in the desperately complex and subtle real world’.¹⁴ This argument emphasises the concept that pseudo-medieval fantasy is developed around the desire to satisfy a particular need or fulfil an interest, rather than (and sometimes in direct opposition to) adhering to any particular known historical fact. There is obviously no need for a patriarchal world to be written as less technically complex than, for example, an egalitarian one – but in the context of a genre that treats patriarchal fictional cultures as the default, the sheer number of possible templates does mean that creating yet another fictional patriarchy is in many ways simpler than choosing to step outside of those traditions.

Secondly, the “realism” argument is based on the assumption that the image of the medieval world that fantasy promotes is, in fact, accurate; and of course the more this image is seen,

¹³ Zita Eva Roh and Lisa Benz, ‘Introduction: Cherchez les femmes: Queenship and the Women of Westeros’ in *Queenship and the Women of Westeros: Female Agency and Advice in Game of Thrones and a Song of Ice and Fire*, ed. by Zita Eva Roh and Lisa Benz (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2019), pp. xxviii-lxxiv, (pp. xxix-lxxiv). Proquest ebook central.

¹⁴ Peter Hunt, ‘Introduction: Fantasy and Alternative Worlds’ in *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*, ed. by Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz (New York: Continuum, 2001), pp.1-41 (p. 4).

the more acceptable it appears to be, despite any inaccuracies. There is a progressively developing interest in looking back at that same history through the lens of race, or gender, or sexuality in order to gain a more complete understanding. Kim M. Phillips and Barry Reay, for example, when discussing their work on premodern understandings of sex and sexuality, state that ‘[w]hole generations of historians, art historians and literary critics have just assumed that the desires and actions of those in the past are expressions of the same sexual impulses and frameworks that we have today’.¹⁵ The dissonance between accurate history and perceived “historical accuracy” is distinctive; Shiloh Carroll argues that in attempting to create a medieval setting in fantasy fiction, ‘what is created is one’s *idea* of the Middle Ages based on one’s exposure to the past as filtered through historians, whether contemporary or from the era, and medievalist intermediaries’.¹⁶ The problem involved in arguing that “realism” is a reason for predominantly depicting (for example) patriarchal societies in pseudo-medieval fantasy is quite clear. To express it more flippantly: there is no reason why one must have bigotry if one may have dragons. However, the argument of realism is nonetheless often used not merely to explain why this pattern is occurring in the genre but also to actively enforce it. Growing diversity in fantasy and science fiction has frequently provoked strong negative responses. For example, in 2015, two overlapping groups of people known as the ‘Sad Puppies’ and the ‘Rabid Puppies’ online organised themselves to deliberately remove diversity from the 2015 Hugo Awards nominations by means of an organised slate and achieved some success (though this was mitigated by the broader voting pool).¹⁷

¹⁵ Kim M. Phillips and Barry Reay, *Sex before Sexuality: A Premodern History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), p. 42.

¹⁶ Shiloh Carroll, *Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2018), p. 14.

¹⁷ Jeet Heer, ‘Science Fiction’s White Boys’ Club Strikes Back’, *New Republic*, 17 April 2015. <<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/121554/2015-hugo-awards-and-history-science-fiction-culture-wars>> [accessed 17 June 2015].

The overall environment that this creates is strongly traditionalist, with attempts to diversify often stifled and existing diversity minimised or ignored. This effect is visible in the amount of critical commentary on fantasy literature that frames it as fundamentally conservative and non-progressive. Even a piece such as Daniel Baker's 'Why We Need Dragons: The Progressive Potential of Fantasy' displays an awareness of this, as Baker notes that '[w]hen this article explores fantasy's progressive potential, it is with the full knowledge that the genre does not skew in that direction traditionally'.¹⁸ For example, the predominance of fictional patriarchies impacts both the presentation of female characters and the possibilities for nuanced engagements with gender more generally. This is something that I will be discussing in light of my case study (Robin Hobb's 'Realm of the Elderlings') later in the thesis. The elements of this traditionalist leaning in the genre – the reduced number of female characters, increased likelihood of inaccurate representation, reduction to harmful trope or stereotype, and/or limited agency and impact on the plot – are echoed in their own ways by other characters who cannot be categorised as entirely straight, white, male, and able-bodied. In this section I have focused on general trends of the genre, using the work of Tolkien and Martin as examples – but even those examples are disputed and not straightforward. Throughout the rest of this thesis, I will be taking a closer look at specific examples of fantasy literature in the 1990-2017 period, some of which resist genre expectations and reformulate them, creating space for the examination and exploration of possibility. The pseudo-medieval fantasy genre has a strong tradition of non-diverse and non-progressive themes, structures and characters. Despite this, it is clear that there remains the potential to have the dragons *without* the bigotry.

¹⁸ Daniel Baker, 'Why We Need Dragons: The Progressive Potential of Fantasy', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 23.3 (2012), 437-459 (p. 438) <<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/why-we-need-dragons-progressive-potential-fantasy/docview/1437188143/se-2>> [accessed 13 April 2022].

Fantasy Criticism

Literary criticism of the fantasy genre consists largely of genre-defining analysis (such as Ken Gelder's *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*), explorations of the fantastic (such as Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*), and critical work on individual texts which are highly regarded (such as Ursula Le Guin's 'Earthsea' quartet, C. S. Lewis' 'The Chronicles of Narnia', Philip Pullman's 'His Dark Materials' trilogy, and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*) or have attracted considerable public attention (George R. R. Martin's 'A Song of Ice and Fire' series, Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* and sequels, and J. K. Rowling's 'Harry Potter' series). These types of analysis often also encompass some horror and science fiction. Gender-related analysis of the genre and its texts is present, but in terms of relevance to this thesis it is often either not focused specifically on pseudo-medieval fantasy or is focused only on a single text – and in these cases it is unusual to find a piece of criticism on fantasy that goes beyond the gender binary.

There are three main elements of fantasy criticism that are useful to this thesis. Firstly, the work on defining the genre of fantasy (and within that, what constitutes pseudo-medieval fantasy); secondly, understandings of genre traditions which provide context for the roles of and expectations for characters who do not conform to the gender binary; and thirdly, examinations of the way in which the current popularity of the fantasy genre has created a large amount of more informal and wide-ranging analysis of the genre.

In setting a non-binary character such as Beloved in the context of pseudo-medieval fantasy literature, an understanding of not just the traditions and forms of the genre but also of its

existing criticism is imperative. In defining the mode of fantasy, Rosemary Jackson defines three distinct types: the marvellous (such as Tolkienesque texts which Jackson also refers to as romance literature), the fantastic, and the uncanny.¹⁹ While acknowledging the existence of Tolkienesque fiction as part of the fantasy genre, Jackson spends relatively little time on it other than to largely dismiss it as rigid, formulaic and always ‘supporting a ruling ideology’.²⁰ This reflects the broader reputation of pseudo-medieval fantasy (as discussed in ‘Of Dragons and Bigotry’ above). Fantasy criticism’s examinations of the definitions of the genre also display an awareness of the line drawn between genre fiction and literary fiction and how this impacts approaches to analysis. Ken Gelder states that ‘a work of Literature is often thought to have ‘transcended’ genre, that is, risen above the lower literary level that popular fiction (because it is generic) is supposed to occupy’.²¹ This conflict between concepts of literary quality and concepts of genre and popular fiction is an important part of understanding the genre’s boundaries and the kinds of texts more likely to be considered “defining”. In a review of Robin Hobb’s fourteenth book in the ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ series, *Fool’s Assassin*, Hobb was described as a writer whose books ‘transcend the fantasy genre’, demonstrating that in some ways the traditions and reputation of a genre can be so strong that to question them or progress from them can be seen as leaving the genre entirely.²²

Fantasy criticism also provides some supporting, more narrowly-focused analysis relating to the roles available to characters within a pseudo-medieval fantasy text – specifically, providing context for the roles that the non-binary character at the centre of this thesis has

¹⁹ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981).

²⁰ Jackson, p. 155.

²¹ Ken Gelder, *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), p. 40.

²² Jane Shilling, ‘Fool’s Assassin by Robin Hobb, review: ‘high art’’, *The Telegraph*, 23 August 2014. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/11048552/Fools-Assassin-by-Robin-Hobb-review-high-art.html>> [accessed 14 June 2015].

been given in their text. Ken Gelder argues that '[i]t is impossible both to write and to read genre fiction without some sense of that genre's history, without a knowledge of the work of generic predecessors' and this applies directly to analysing the presentation of gender in the text, even when non-binary characters themselves are rare.²³ Stereotypical character types in pseudo-medieval fantasy often stem from the traditional quest narrative and often reflect traditional archetypes – hero, guide, love interest – that are often gendered. As the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre does not have an extensive tradition for non-binary characters, the history of the roles that non-binary characters do occupy is a significant point of investigation in terms of their gendered nature and how commonly they are seen in the genre.

The Vocabulary of Gender

The language of queer social movements is the subject of fierce debate as participants work to establish themselves as distinct from the Western, binary, heteronormative tradition with accuracy and inclusivity while struggling to either avoid or reclaim slurs and derogatory terms. Much of this vocabulary quickly becomes politically charged or the subject of argument or both, regardless of whether or not it is picked up by mainstream media, and by extension its use in academic analysis requires careful consideration. Michele J. Eliason's 2014 paper argues for standardising this language for academia, something that has been debated at length.²⁴ Three years later, Rossi and Lopez, discussing the use of language for LGBT+ patients in medical settings, advise as follows:

Thus providers need to allow for spaces where individuals can define themselves rather than forcing them to choose only from predefined and often narrow categorizations that serve to perpetuate stereotypes and discrimination. Instead of placing the health care provider in the role of defining the patient by having to memorize ever changing terms and guessing which might fit the individual best, focus

²³ Gelder, p. 55

²⁴ Michele J. Eliason, 'An Exploration of Terminology Related to Sexuality and Gender: Arguments for Standardizing the Language', *Social Work in Public Health*, 29.2 (2014), 162-175 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2013.775887>>.

can be shifted onto the creation of inclusive environments, enabling and empowering providers to create safe spaces that allow for patients to identify and be themselves.²⁵

While obviously literary analysis is a different context to medical treatment, this type of advice is echoed across multiple disciplines and reflects the general stance of the transgender and non-binary community. Susan Stryker, writing about transgender history, takes the time to emphasise the effect this has on any academic work: ‘Please keep in mind that new terms and concepts come into existence all the time, and that the words being used when this book was written may well have fallen out of currency, or out of favor, by the time this book is being read’.²⁶ The speed at which the language around these issues is changing also means that most academic works will inevitably be months if not several years behind current discussions. Additionally, S. Bear Bergman’s discussion of non-binary activism focuses on the significance of language use and explores its complexity:

There is no trans equivalent of the *Academie Française* [sic], where a group of people meet, discuss, and decide what new words are actual words and what they mean. This leads to internal conflicts and heated debates among trans and non-binary people about what words are best to use, and because those debates are entirely decentralised, you could well find yourself using a word you learned in Chicago as respectful and appropriate and being told in Atlanta that you’re using oppressive language and to get out. [...] trans communities have come to a place where we have the cultural agency, finally, to explain and describe our own experiences using our own language, and while this is a messy and inconsistent process, it’s also a pivotal (and frankly thrilling) moment in identity development.²⁷

Emphasising that language belongs to its users, the transgender and non-binary community contains a wide variety of different perspectives on individual words, some of which

²⁵ Alexis L. Rossi and Eliot J. Lopez, ‘Contextualizing Competence: Language and LGBT-Based Competency in Health Care’, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 64.10 (2017), 1330-1349, (p. 1341) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1321361>>.

²⁶ Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2017), p.10.

²⁷ S. Bear Bergman, ‘Non-Binary Language’ in *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders* ed. by Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman, and Meg-John Barker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 39-45 (p. 42).

contradict one another. Nevertheless, most discussion of the subject will argue that control of language, while an almost unnoticed norm in cisgender communities, is vital to communities currently fighting for recognition and the rights of their members. The use of language is often considered of particular importance when discussing the act of gendering or misgendering a person: transgender activist Laverne Cox stated in her speech at the 2014 Creating Change conference that ‘I understand, I’ve come to understand that when a trans woman is called a man that is an act of violence’.²⁸ And Eris Young’s book *They/Them/Their*, which draws directly from surveys and questionnaires of the non-binary community, dedicates an entire chapter to the significance of language use and how much power and influence it has in the creation of community, the development of acceptance, and social change.²⁹

When I first began this project in 2014, not only was the language in this area complex but there was little consistent precedence in academic work. It was useful to investigate a variety of sources for the definitions and explanations of vocabulary currently in use. These included informal or personal blogs centred around gender identity and/or sexuality, the websites of and resources provided by various queer organisations and queer-friendly institutions, Wikipedia (its discussion pages as well as its articles), academic texts and essays focused on the subject and of course a number of dictionaries. In total I investigated twenty-one glossaries, all with their own variations. When returning to this mix of sources for my final revisions in late 2021, it is clear that much has changed in seven years. For a detailed

²⁸ Laverne Cox, *Laverne Cox at Creating Change 2014 (E)*, National LGBTQ Task Force, (2014), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cytc0p4Jwg>> [accessed 23 June 2015].

²⁹ Eris Young, *They/Them/Their*, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2020), pp. 43-62.

overview of the way in which academic use of vocabulary in this field has shifted, please see Nat Thorne and others' 2019 paper.³⁰

While it is important to not allow focus on language choice to overwhelm the actual topic of any given project, it is also important not to ignore the fundamental role that language related to gender plays in how that gender is presented and understood. Key to my research has been investigating and deciding which terms to use when referring to the characters that I am discussing. As there is some variance across the characters in question, it seemed most appropriate to use an umbrella term to describe them (most gender-related umbrella terms can also be used by individuals to refer to themselves). The three options that I considered were *transgender*, *genderqueer* and *non-binary*.

Perhaps the most commonly used umbrella term is *transgender* and its abbreviation *trans*. Both *transgender* and *trans* are terms with a great deal of academic use. Kuper, Nussbaum, and Mustanski's 2012 study of transgender statistics found that 42.8% of participants identified as transgender, and stated that 'the ways individuals identifying as transgender experience and express their sense of gender vary greatly; thus, a precise definition of the term remains elusive'.³¹ Five years later, Susan Stryker tackled the definition in *Transgender History* as follows:

I use it [transgender] in this book to refer to people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans-*) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender.³²

³⁰ Nat Thorne and others, 'The terminology of identities between, outside and beyond the gender binary – A systematic review', *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 20.2-3 (2019), 138-154 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2019.1640654>>.

³¹ Laura E. Kuper, Robin Nussbaum and Brian Mustanski, 'Exploring the Diversity of Gender and Sexual Orientation Identities in an Online Sample of Transgender Individuals', *The Journal of Sex Research*, 49.2-3 (2012), 244-254 (p. 244) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2011.596954>>.

³² Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, p. 1.

She then went on to add that ‘*Transgender* entered widespread use in the early 1990s, although the word has a longer history that stretches back to the mid-1960s and has meant many contradictory things at different times’.³³ This shift in not so much the meaning of the term as confidence in its stability and authenticity is testament to the societal change that has occurred on the subject from not just the 1960s to the present day, but even from 2012 to 2017.

Although *transgender* is academically common and also widely considered to be an acceptable umbrella term which encompasses most (if not all) non-cis genders as well as including *non-binary* and *genderqueer*, I have chosen not to use it as my primary term in this thesis. I have made this decision because, firstly, throughout the research process it has become increasingly clear that despite the definitions given above, *transgender* is frequently and strongly associated with binary transgender individuals. While this is not the exclusive definition of *transgender*, its very broadness renders it imprecise for the characters that I am discussing.

The second option, *genderqueer*, also has some academic precedence. It is a term commonly used in connection to activism and queer politics, and is reasonably well-known – Kuper, Nussbaum, and Mustanski’s 2012 survey found that 55.1% of participants selected the word *genderqueer* as one of their identifying labels.³⁴ Stryker grouped *gender-nonconforming*, *genderqueer*, and *non-binary* together, stating that these ‘terms all refer to people who do not conform to binary notions of the alignment of sex, gender, gender identity, gender role,

³³ Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, p. 36.

³⁴ Kuper, Nussbaum and Mustanski, p. 244.

gender expression, or gender presentation'.³⁵ She then goes on to state that, though the distinctions are subtle, '*genderqueer* (or *gender queer*) is associated more with particular subcultural forms of gender expression that have emerged in LGBT communities or in punk-, goth-, or fetish-inspired countercultural fashion'.³⁶ Additionally, Thorne and others noted in 2019 that genderqueer has 'often been associated with a political stance against gender and a political bent', though added that this is not the limit of its definition.³⁷

The third option is *non-binary* (used interchangeably with *nonbinary*). This term was not well-known in academia when I began my research; often when searching for academic resources it would only bring up uses of the term in mathematics papers, for example. This has shifted considerably over the last seven years, and *non-binary* is now a much more standard term in gender studies and overlapping fields – see Richards and others'

Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders (2017), for example, and of course I refer again to Thorne and others' overview (2019).

Non-binary does not purely refer to only genders entirely other than female or male. Rather, the use of *binary* in this context assumes that a binary is a mutually exclusive arrangement that precludes any combination, and therefore to be *non-binary* may be to be a gender other than female or male or to have no gender at all, but it may also be to be female and male, female and other, male and other, genderfluid or any other variation that is not cisgender. This is a fairly standard definition. Eris Young states that 'nonbinary' broadly covers any gender identity which lies outside the one-or-the-other binary of 'man' and 'woman'.³⁸

Richards, Bouman, and Barker use the following description:

³⁵ Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, p. 24.

³⁶ Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, p. 24.

³⁷ Nat Thorne and others, p. 148.

³⁸ Eris Young, p. 18.

[T]here are non-binary people who identify as a single fixed gender position other than male or female. There are those who have a fluid gender. There are those who have no gender. And there are those who disagree with the very idea of gender.³⁹

They also refer to Titman's definition, used as part of Titman's work on non-binary statistics in the UK, which defines non-binary as 'an umbrella term for any gender (or lack of gender) that would not be adequately represented by an either/or choice between 'man' or 'woman'.'⁴⁰ These definitions are not greatly different from the various definitions of *genderqueer*, making the choice to use one word or the other in this thesis one of fine distinctions. After careful consideration, I have elected to use *non-binary* due to its appropriate level of specificity (broad enough to cover the variety among the characters I am analysing, specific enough not to refer to too many), its comparative neutrality (avoiding the more political associations of *genderqueer*, which have a complicated application if any to the fictional characters discussed), and its now more standard use in academia. While I use *non-binary* to refer to characters throughout the thesis, I will also use *transgender and non-binary* to refer to that community, and other vocabulary when specifically appropriate.

There were several other vocabulary choices to be made for this thesis, two of which are of particular note. Firstly, I have chosen to use *anatomy* rather than *sex* when discussing physical aspects considered (in a cisnormative framework) indicators of gender. This is to reflect that in the pseudo-medieval setting, character information is typically limited to anatomy specifically (rather than also including an understanding of hormones or chromosomes).

³⁹ Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman, and Meg-John Barker, 'Introduction', in *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*, ed. by Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman, and Meg-John Barker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 1-8 (p. 5).

⁴⁰ Nat Titman, *How Many People in the United Kingdom are Nonbinary?* (2014), <<https://practicalandrogyny.com/2014/12/16/how-many-people-in-the-uk-are-nonbinary/>> [accessed November 19, 2021].

Secondly, the pronouns used to refer to different fictional characters – I have, for the sake of consistency between my own writing and quotes or excerpts from the text in question, decided to use the pronouns that each character is given in their text. The exception to this is Beloved, whom I refer to as *they* when in text they are either *he* or *she*. I have made this exception partly due to the length at which Beloved is discussed in the thesis, and partly for the same reason that I refer to them as *Beloved* rather than any of their other many names: because it allows me to more clearly refer to the whole of their character, rather than a particular aspect or face that they only use in certain contexts.

Additional Theoretical and Critical Contexts

The theoretical framework of this thesis consists primarily of feminist theory, fantasy criticism, queer theory, and transgender studies. There are obviously some overlaps and similarities in the ways in which this thesis will use aspects of this framework, and equally there are some aspects which are not necessarily relevant in their entirety. I will therefore clarify the ways in which this thesis will be using which parts of its theoretical framework. As fantasy criticism is introduced above, I will take the time now to overview the relevance of feminist theory, queer theory, and transgender studies to my thesis.

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory is particularly known for a type of revisionist approach as applied to literature, which seeks out a previously ignored or minimised female voice and perspective. Though the focus of this thesis is on non-binary gender rather than on women, there are two key ways in which feminist theory can apply. Firstly, feminist theory is able to provide one possible frame for an exploration of non-binary gender in fantasy literature: an analysis of the

role of characters of a particular gender in a text, their presentation and treatment and how this compares with that of other characters, the language used around them, and how this relates to (by supporting or subverting) cultural and literary norms. In exploring non-binary gender in fantasy literature, this frame is a useful way in which to see more clearly how a text is using a character of a particular gender in terms of roles, presentation, language and cultural context. It is important to demonstrate awareness not simply of a character's presentation but of the depiction of their gender in relation to the text's engagement with cultural and genre-specific attitudes to gender as a whole. The framework of analysing a character and their presentation within the context of cultural and literary norms is also very useful with regards to putting the non-binary character in the context of the fantasy genre – particularly pseudo-medieval fantasy, with its extreme focus on patriarchal and binary-gendered societies.

A second, related way in which feminist theory will be useful to this thesis is by its concern with what Deborah L. Madsen describes as 'the definitions of gender that limit and oppress'.⁴¹ Feminist theory's focus on the ways in which gender is defined as well as the extent to which these are culturally created, reinforced, and rendered problematic or oppressive is very relevant to an analysis of a non-binary character, particularly in the context of the depiction of the definitions of the gender binary within the text in question. An example of this type of analysis can be found in Brian Attebery's writing on Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, in which Attebery states that often '[t]he only good androgyne, in other words, is a male androgyne'.⁴² This is one perspective through which the depiction of a gender that is neither male nor female can be criticized: by seeing it through

⁴¹ Deborah L. Madsen, *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. ix.

⁴² Brian Attebery, *Decoding Genders in Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 133.

the lens of role-restrictive female oppression wherein female is the marked form and male the unmarked, rendering the masculine as neutral and therefore the idea of genderfluidity and gender-neutrality weighted towards masculine. Scott Kiesling describes this by arguing that men ‘are the default human category in language, in society’.⁴³ More broadly, feminist theory has explored the nature of gender as a cultural construct (a concept taken further in queer theory and transgender studies as discussed below) and what this means for depictions of gender in fictional texts with regards to their relationship with the real world. The ideas that emerge from this perspective provide a foundation upon which the depiction of any gender can be analysed and more fully understood.

A potential disadvantage to the application of feminist theory in this thesis is found in what might be called its presumption of awareness – for all women and their fictional counterparts have been ignored, erased and misrepresented in Western literature, their existence (even if not ever discussed on the page) is taken for granted. A text may only ever mention male characters, but no critic would deny that the author knew that women existed. For non-binary characters, no such presumption exists in the Western literary tradition – indeed a denial of the existence of non-binary genders is a fundamental part of their oppression in Western binary-gender society, and has even been associated with colonialism due to the erasure of genders other than male and female that exist in, for example, Native American culture by colonial forces.⁴⁴ This difference of experience between women and non-binary persons can be reflected in their respective literary representations and means that a feminist framework

⁴³ Scott Kiesling, ‘Men, Masculinities, and Language’, *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 1.6 (2007), 653-673 (p. 655) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-818X.2007.00035.x>>.

⁴⁴ Ben Vincent and Ana Manzano, ‘History and Cultural Diversity’, in *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*, ed. by Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman, and Meg-John Barker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 11-30.

does not fulfil all the needs of an analysis of non-binary gender. Despite this, it is still able to provide a useful angle through which to examine the subject of this thesis.

Queer Theory

This thesis, as it examines the presentation of non-binary characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy, will also make considerable use of both queer theory and transgender studies. In terms of the depiction of a marginalized identity, presentation within the text and representation as a connection between the real non-binary community and the text are inextricably interconnected. In order to explore the presentation of any given character as non-binary, this thesis must also examine how that character serves as representation for the non-binary community, a concept that both queer theory and transgender studies have helped to form a deeper understanding of.

To address the former first, queer theory is relevant to this thesis not purely because of its focus on ideas about gender and sexuality other than cisgender and heterosexual norms, but also in view of its use of ‘to queer’ as an action, its discussions of the relationship between and definitions of queer and mainstream culture, and perhaps most importantly in its explorations of the destabilisation of the political, social, cultural and linguistic boundaries surrounding sexuality and gender roles.

Non-binary gender, by its very definition, is a concept that demands frames of reference beyond a simple male/female categorisation. Queer theory can provide these frames of reference, both in terms of theoretical concepts and language to use. This thesis will draw upon the work of queer theorists such as Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam, Susan S. Lanser’s work on queer theory’s interaction with narrative theory, and the broader example

set by queer theory's study of how queerness of sexuality and gender is depicted and represented in literature. This work can be seen in texts such as *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film and Television*, a collection of work edited by Thomas Peele, which explores 'how these texts of popular culture both replay mainstream representations and undermine them'.⁴⁵ As with feminist theory, queer theory has a strong presence in criticism of the science fiction genre as well as in some of its primary texts, and while not all of this work will apply to fantasy literature – particularly pseudo-medieval fantasy – there will nevertheless be some aspects that are relevant, such as found in Anamarija Šporčič's article 'The (Ir)Relevance of Science Fiction to Non-Binary and Genderqueer Readers', which examines how non-binary characters in science fiction might be interpreted and understood.⁴⁶ In addition, given the recent popularity of fantasy texts in popular culture, queer theory work that explores fantasy itself is growing more prevalent – of particular note is Peter Melville's paper, 'Queerness and Homophobia in Robin Hobb's Farseer Trilogies'.⁴⁷

The act of 'queering' is one that can be both applied and examined in multiple ways. Jill Ehnenn, in her work on queerness in 'Harry Potter', states that queer theory provides a way in which to 'think of "queer" as a verb, a reception practice, an anti-heteronormative way of reading and seeing the world'.⁴⁸ This is not only practiced by experiencing and analysing a text but can also be demonstrated within the text itself. In this thesis I primarily discuss the act of queering as something that interacts with the narrative and the perspective of the narrative, particularly in the light of the way in which Beloved is always viewed through a

⁴⁵ Thomas Peele, 'Introduction: Popular Culture, Queer Culture', in *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film and Television*, ed. by Thomas Peele (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 1-8 (p. 4).

⁴⁶ Anamarija Šporčič, 'The (Ir)Relevance of Science Fiction to Non-Binary and Genderqueer Readers', *ELOPE: English Language Overseas Perspectives and Enquiries*, 15.1 (2018), 51-67.

⁴⁷ Peter Melville, 'Queerness and Homophobia in Robin Hobb's Farseer Trilogies', *Extrapolation* 59.3 (2018), 281-303.

⁴⁸ Jill R. Ehnenn, 'Queering Harry Potter', in *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film and Television*, ed. by Thomas Peele (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 229-256 (p. 4).

cisgender perspective – primarily Fitz’s, who gradually shifts his understanding of them as the series progresses. For this analysis I primarily draw on Susan Lanser’s paper ‘Queering Narrative Voice’ (2018) as well as articulations of the diegetic/extradiegetic structure from Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (1983). Queer theory’s explorations and discussions of the definitions of and relationship between queer and non-queer allows a space for examining the effects of normalisation and the aims of and reasons behind current demands for better representation of gender, race and sexuality in literature which are often tied to activism and desire for acceptance of difference. Queer theory can in this way demonstrate and explore the conflict between queerness and cis- and heteronormativity and how the two nonetheless feed into and affect each other.

These two interrelated aspects of queer theory – the act of queering and the relationship between the queer and the non-queer – will underpin this thesis’ exploration of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature. It will also be fundamental to the thesis’ case study on the presentation of Beloved as non-binary in ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ by providing a lens through which to examine ideas of queerness as depicted in the text. Hobb’s focus on liminality, boundaries and concepts of the self/other binary is demonstrated throughout the text in multiple ways and by multiple characters, but none more so than Fitz (the sole narrator of six of the books) and Beloved - and though gender is not the only aspect of that focus, it is an extremely significant one. Given that Fitz’s perspective, which while liminal in its own ways is indisputably cis- and heteronormative, is the predominant perspective through which the reader views the non-binary Beloved, an understanding of both the act and effect of queering as well as the impact of queer culture and perspectives on the non-queer (and vice-versa) is imperative.

Finally, queer theory builds on the work of feminist theory in its explorations of the destabilising of the political, social, cultural and linguistic boundaries surrounding sexuality and gender roles, and how they are interrelated and interdependent. These boundaries are all brought into view to varying degrees in the presence of a non-binary character, and demonstrated in the text through that character's interactions with other characters, role in the narrative and positioning within the fictional culture. In 'Realm of the Elderlings', for example, these boundaries are rendered unstable both on a cultural and a single-character level. This is done through both the act of queering and through the contrasting of queer with non-queer, as discussed above; queer theory also provides the groundwork for the ways in which this instability of boundaries affects the text more broadly. The instability of these boundaries around sexuality and gender roles, for example, calls into question other boundaries in related areas (for if one boundary considered fixed becomes movable, others may be likewise susceptible) but can also create and reinforce new boundaries with new definitions. In which case, the destabilisation of the political, social, cultural and linguistic boundaries around gender may not cause a general dissolution of boundaries but demonstrates the necessity of them, albeit in different and perhaps more easily alterable forms. Discourse around the destabilisation of cis- and heteronormative structures as found in queer theory provides a context for this thesis as well as specific ways in which to approach its subject matter.

A disadvantage of using queer theory to examine a non-binary character is, however, its focus on sexuality. The potential for slippage between concepts of gender and sexuality in this type of analysis is significant, largely because of the nearly co-dependent status that the two concepts have within cis- and heteronormative culture. Within a text, therefore, many indications of the queering of one may also support an argument for the queering of the other,

or can be difficult to render distinct. For example, Joseph Bristow's examination of homoerotic writing describes the way 'in which effeminacy became the main stigma attached to male homosexuality'.⁴⁹ In the example of *Beloved*, a character may demonstrate both a non-cisnormative gender *and* a non-heteronormative sexuality, and in examining the first it is important to acknowledge the second without allowing the relevant yet tangential area to dominate the analysis. Therefore, queer theory is useful to this thesis but this potential for conflation will necessarily be managed with care.

Transgender Studies

Transgender studies is still considered relatively new as an academic discipline, though as Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura state in the introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, 'there had of course been a great deal of academic, scholarly, and scientific work on various forms of gender variance long before the 1990s'.⁵⁰ Transgender Studies is still negotiating and adjusting its position as a field alongside and in relation to feminist theory, lesbian and gay studies, and queer theory. Its relevance to this thesis is threefold: in its accounting of existing discourse on non-cisgender genders and the available frameworks for analysis; in its emphasis on the significance of the inadequacies of the language around gender; and in the work it has produced devoted to exploring what gender is, has been, and could be.

In examining the presentation of a non-binary character, it is necessary to understand and acknowledge (at minimum) what existing discourse is available to support this analysis.

Work by many different theorists (such as that gathered in compilations like *The Transgender*

⁴⁹ Joseph Bristow, *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing After 1885* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 2.

⁵⁰ Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, 'Introduction: Transgender Studies 2.0', in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. by Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1-12 (p. 1).

Studies Reader of 2006 and *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* of 2013) provide an accounting of much of this discourse, from early medical and psychological work through to more contemporary work on the construction of gender. More recent texts such as *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*, a collection of works from various fields published in 2017, deal specifically with non-binary gender. Work in this field can be found in many areas, but consist predominantly of medical, psychological, and legal texts with a growing number of independent theoretical pieces. It is also worthwhile to include less traditionally academic texts such as Eris Young's *They/Them/Their* (2020) and work on the history of the community (such as Susan Stryker's *Transgender History*, a revised edition of which was published in 2017), as both of these can offer additional insights. Although as previously discussed both feminist theory and queer theory provide viewpoints into and discourse useful to the subject of this thesis, it is transgender studies that most specifically approaches the subject matter in question – non-binary gender – and therefore provides in many ways a much more precise set of methods with which to work. The support of feminist theory and queer theory remains important, however, due largely to the greater length of time that they have been producing analysis in a literary context compared to transgender studies. Theorists such as Stephen Whittle posit, also, that 'trans studies is a true linking of feminist and queer theory', allowing for the use of aspects of both feminist theory and queer theory as focused more specifically by transgender studies.⁵¹ Ways of discussing gender outside of cisnormativity have developed through the progress of transgender studies alongside the understanding of transgender narratives. Ideas about persecution, deception, sickness, identity, human rights and the concept of being "born in the wrong body" have all emerged as part of how our culture – and our academia as part of that culture – understands transgender

⁵¹ Stephen Whittle, 'Foreword', in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. xi-xvi (p. xii).

and non-binary people and their position in our society. Stephen Whittle states that ‘[t]he work of trans activists and trans academics has always been linked’, and this is clearly echoed in what work there is on the representation of the non-cisgender person in popular culture.⁵² Work such as Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* looks at transgender representation but does so within the context of its real effect on the people concerned, and the ways in which the transgender voice is lost or subsumed beneath the cisgender one – particularly in fictional works based on true events such as Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet* and the 1999 film *Boys Don’t Cry*.⁵³ The connection between the fictional and the real is vital to transgender studies – as it is to queer theory and feminist theory – and adds a layer of importance to the seeking out and analysing of non-binary characters. Transgender studies therefore provides a basis upon which such analysis can be performed.

Transgender studies also explores the language around gender and its inadequacies, a concept which is extremely relevant when examining the presentation of a non-binary literary character – a linguistic creation in a linguistic medium, created using a language that is inherently unable to fully describe them. To begin with, transgender studies acknowledges the importance of language in human society – the lack of which can quickly result in the exclusion of a group or individual from society in a very real sense. Within that, there is the transgender and non-binary community, in which language is equally if not more important. Eris Young argues that ‘the gendered (and often binary) uses of language throughout the world present one of the biggest obstacles to the social and legal acceptance, and perceived legitimacy, of non-binary and genderqueer identities’.⁵⁴ The importance of language to this

⁵² Whittle, ‘Foreword’, p. xii.

⁵³ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

⁵⁴ Eris Young, p. 43.

community is fundamentally entwined with its marginalised status. As with many marginalised groups, to gain linguistic acceptance (to have language include you) is an important part of becoming legitimised by society, and so many activists and theorists focus on shifts in language as part of progressive social change. Stephen Whittle, writing in the foreword of *The Transgender Studies Reader* in 2006, states that ‘it is only by understanding and accepting that linguistic barriers still exclude the vast diversities of trans and non-trans identities, that we can possibly begin to accept that gender, like race, simply does not exist other than as an idea that has gained immeasurable power within the economies of social discourse’.⁵⁵ The power to define oneself or one’s group by one’s own terms is therefore of vital importance, and as discussed above (see ‘The Vocabulary of Gender’), within the transgender and non-binary community this is often emphasised on an individual level as well as a community level in that the community actively discourages the act of labelling others with a perceived gender and instead encourages asking the individuals how they label themselves.

Finally, transgender studies dedicates much energy to defining and exploring what gender is, has been, and could be, providing multiple perspectives through which any given non-binary character can be critically examined. By analysing gender as a concept that has been considered a physical fact, a psychological state, and a cultural construct, among other things, transgender studies provides a varied collection of ways in which to view non-binary gender and examine broader concepts of gender within the text itself; and the importance of activism in trans studies creates a space in which to explore this presentation and representation in the context of gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy and in western popular culture more broadly.

⁵⁵ Whittle, ‘Foreword’, p. xiv.

Shifting Queer Narratives

As time goes on, queer-friendly fantasy is becoming more common, as well as fantasy with a queer lead. By queer-friendly fantasy I refer to narratives such as Laini Taylor's 'Strange the Dreamer' duology (2017-2018), Laura Sebastian's 'Ash Princess' trilogy (2018-2020) and Maya Motayne's *Nocturna* (2019) – texts in which while the central character may not be queer, other characters are. They depict worlds in which queerness simply exists without being central but also without being forgotten, dismissed, or Othered (at least by the main character, and often by anyone). The rise in queer-friendly texts is an important development for pseudo-medieval fantasy – the treatment of queer characters as an ordinary part of fantasy narratives is something that encourages the acceptance of more queer texts as well as signalling a shift from pseudo-medieval fantasy's previously overwhelming focus on purely hetero- and cis-normative stories. Pseudo-medieval fantasy with a queer lead or a part of the leading ensemble is also becoming more common – take for example Leigh Bardugo's 'Six of Crows' duology (2015-2016), Garrett Robinson's 'Academy Journals' series (2016), Melissa Caruso's 'Swords and Fire' trilogy (2017-2019), Natasha Ngan's *Girls of Paper and Fire* (2018), Samantha Shannon's *The Priory of the Orange Tree* (2019) and Rin Chupeco's *The Never Tilting World* (2019) to list but a few.

This rise in queer representation in pseudo-medieval fantasy follows a rise in queer representation in fiction more generally, as well as shift in the way the queer community is seen in wider culture. In the last few decades, the visibility of the queer community has increased, and many legal and cultural changes have taken place. At the time of writing, same-sex marriage is legal in thirty-one countries, with the United States of America joining them in 2015 and most of the United Kingdom in 2014 (with Northern Ireland doing so in

2020).⁵⁶ More specifically in the case of the transgender and non-binary community's rise in visibility, the Gender Recognition Act 2004 (which came into effect in the UK in 2005) allowed those with gender dysphoria to change their legal gender by following a particular process.⁵⁷ This is a significant part of a timeline that indicates a very important time period for the transgender and non-binary community, both legally and in terms of public recognition – the adjustment of the Equality Act in 2010 to account for non-binary people specifically instead of only binary transgender people, the shift from Gender Identity Disorder to Gender Dysphoria in the fifth edition of the DSM in 2013, and the occurrence of the first non-binary gender-focused academic conference in 2016 (SexGen North at Leeds University). These are only a few examples among many that demonstrate that transgender and non-binary people have been gaining public visibility, particularly during the last two decades. These gains are being slowly reflected in fiction.

This increase in queer representation is also part of a broader push for greater diversity in fiction by organisations such as We Need Diverse Books, which has specifically led to a degree of social activism-driven representation in fiction. The prioritisation of diversity in fiction is particularly obvious in young adult fiction (of the examples of queer-friendly and queer-led fantasy I gave at the start of this section, six of the nine are marketed to a teen audience), with its focus on developing as an adult and understanding identity, but is also present in smaller ways across other genres of fiction. Laura Lam, fantasy author, was quoted on the subject in *The National* in 2016: 'Now I can say that my protagonist is intersex and

⁵⁶ Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 'Marriage Equality Around the World' (2021), <<https://www.hrc.org/resources/marriage-equality-around-the-world>> [accessed 13 April 2022].

⁵⁷ *Gender Recognition Act 2004* (c. 7) [Online] <<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/7/contents>> [accessed 13 April 2022].

people know what that means. Things and times have changed. There are also a lot more LGBTQI books coming out now and they are being given a marketing push'.⁵⁸

A further aspect of this activism is the trend of prioritising authors who share the identity of the character/s they are writing – for example, a text in which a trans woman writes a story about a trans woman (such as Meredith Russo's 2016 contemporary teen novel *If I Was Your Girl*). This is commonly referred to as #OwnVoices. While some benefits have been noted with regard to the perceived legitimacy of texts written from personal experience as opposed to the perceptions (and perhaps misconceptions) of a less knowledgeable writer, this trend has been criticised particularly in regards to queer identities, as some argue that it is unreasonable to expect all authors to be publicly out or to not permit closeted authors to write about their own non-public identity. Robert Bittner discusses the values and disadvantages at length:

The original purpose of #OwnVoices, as I understand it, has been corrupted, moving from something that allowed readers to know if a book had been written by someone with a personal connection to a specific marginalized identity, to something that the publishing industry and many educators and reviewers see as a stamp of “authenticity,” an assurance that a book will be less likely to contain stereotypes or other problematic elements because of the link between authorship and the nuances of lived experience.⁵⁹

Bittner also goes on to discuss how #OwnVoices, while valuable, ‘can do more harm than good in relation to LGBTQ+ authorship’, as they add pressure to be openly and publicly queer.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ The National, ‘Author Laura Lam on using fiction to explore the blurred lines of gender identity’, *The National*, 20 June 2016. <<https://www.thenational.scot/news/14867280.author-laura-lam-on-using-fiction-to-explore-the-blurred-lines-of-gender-identity>> [accessed 13 April 2022].

⁵⁹ Robert Bittner, ‘Beyond Mere Representation in the Classroom: Finding and Teaching Literature by and about LGBTQ Authors’ *Journal of Children's Literature* 46.2 (2020), 36-47 (p. 37) <<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/beyond-mere-representation-classroom-finding/docview/2500499164/se-2?accountid=12860>> [accessed 13 April 2022].

⁶⁰ Bittner, p37.

Overall it is clear to see that the shift in fantasy fiction from little to no queer representation to queer lead characters is only part of a wider shift in both fiction and culture towards queer acceptance, including changes to law, medical definitions, and cultural attitudes. However, it is not a process without resistance.

Some of the elements of resistance to queer narratives were discussed in ‘Of Dragons and Bigotry’ above; these are the elements that are typically used to object to the push for diversity in pseudo-medieval fantasy more broadly, namely the insistence on so-called “historical accuracy” and “realism”. Queer identities are also often considered inherently sexual in a way that exceeds their cisgender and/or heterosexual counterparts, and fiction which includes them is sometimes labelled as inappropriate for this reason. Some of this, at least in the United Kingdom, can be seen in the legacy of Section 28, a 1988 law which stated that a local authority ‘shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality’ or ‘promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’, something which has since been overturned but limited many things, including the sharing of queer fiction in schools.⁶¹ Section 28 is only one example but does serve as a demonstration of the ways in which queer identity and by extension queer fiction can be treated as inherently adult at minimum.

Trans Media Watch, in 2011, identified the ‘sustainment of a climate of ridicule and humiliation’ for transgender people in the British press, calling the depiction of transgender

⁶¹ *Local Government Act 1988* (c. 9) [Online] <<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/9/section/28/1991-02-01>> [accessed 13 April 2022].

and intersex people ‘unethical and often horrific and humiliating’.⁶² This has continued as the years have gone on – Shon Faye states that ‘[i]n 2020 alone *The Times* and its sister paper *The Sunday Times* between them ran over 300 articles – almost one a day – on trans people’, and goes on to discuss the ways in which this has had a harmful impact on the progress towards safety for non-binary and transgender people in the UK.⁶³

There has also been a wave of resistance to LGBT education in school, which also reflects the concept of queer identity as primarily “adult”. At one protest against a school in Saltley, parents ‘held signs that read “say no to promoting of homosexuality and LGBT ways of life to our children”, “stop exploiting children’s innocence”, and “education not indoctrination”’.⁶⁴ Another example is the arguments surrounding guidance given to teachers and schools about transgender and non-binary pupils; one group published a ‘school’s resource pack’ which resulted in controversy:

Its guidance urges schools to abandon what it sees as “special rules” for transgender pupils and to ignore existing advice, which it claims is biased in favour of transgender people.

But the LGBT charity Stonewall, which advises hundreds of English schools, said the guidance is “packed with factually inaccurate content” and warned schools they “must have nothing to do with this deeply damaging publication”.⁶⁵

These debates indicate the strong level of contention that the growing visibility of the transgender and non-binary community is facing, and it is something that impacts all forms of visibility – including in fiction.

⁶² Trans Media Watch, *The British Press and the Transgender Community* (2011), <<http://transmediawatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Publishable-Trans-Media-Watch-Submission.pdf>> [accessed 13 April 2022].

⁶³ Shon Faye, *The Transgender Issue*, (London: Penguin Random House, 2021), p. 6.

⁶⁴ Nazia Parveen, ‘Birmingham school stops LGBT lessons after parents protest’, *The Guardian*, 4 March 2019. <<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/mar/04/birmingham-school-stops-lgbt-lessons-after-parent-protests>> [accessed 13 April 2022] (para. 9 of 24).

⁶⁵ Freddie Whittaker, ‘Schools urged to ignore ‘dangerous’ gender guidance’, *Schoolsweek.co.uk*, 15 February 2018. <<https://schoolsweek.co.uk/schools-urged-to-ignore-dangerous-gender-guidance/>> [accessed 13 April 2022] (para. 4-5 of 16).

There are a number of other complexities that I will address in this thesis, one of which is language. As discussed above, the language of queerness is complex and quickly evolving. In pseudo-medieval fantasy – and, indeed, in any other genre of fiction set in environments or time periods that lack or alter elements of vocabulary – the issue of queer language is particularly challenging. In my research I have yet to find a pseudo-medieval fantasy novel published between 1990 and 2017 which includes either contemporary language for gender variance (*transgender* or *non-binary* or *genderqueer*, for example) or invented terms to refer to the same phenomena. Characters might exhibit non-normative gender presentation, anatomy, or sexual behaviour, but without the vocabulary to express it in-text they are left, uncategorised, for readers and academics to define as they will (and often inconsistently). In this thesis, while I am covering many texts, my focus on Robin Hobb’s ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ means that the character in question is Beloved. Known variously as the Fool, Amber, Lord Golden and Beloved, their refusal to be firmly categorised as male or female is persistent and clear. However, neither Beloved nor any of the other characters in the text give a specific term to refer to this concept, and no specific term has been given by Robin Hobb. This complicates how to apply arguments that expression and behaviour do not equal gender identity or sexuality, particularly in contexts wherein a character might be under pressure to perform a certain role.

In the first two chapters of this thesis, I will be discussing the broader pseudo-medieval fantasy genre, including works by Julia Ember, Robin Hobb, Robert Jordan, George R. R. Martin, Linsey Miller, William Nicholson, and Christopher Paolini. I will first take each example and dedicate a short analysis to it, before discussing the elements common to these characters in chapter two. Chapters three and four concern Beloved of Hobb’s ‘Realm of the

Elderlings'. I will place them in the context of the genre to which they belong in light of the patterns that emerge from the analysis in chapters one and two, and then go on to discuss Beloved's narrative framing and the impact it has upon the depiction of their gender.

Chapter One: Complicating the Monstrous

Are non-binary characters present in pseudo-medieval fantasy, a genre with a reputation for conservative and regressive depictions of gender? And if so, where can they be found and why? As discussed in the introduction, issues of representation in fiction have become progressively more mainstream, and it is important not to confine analyses of diversity to the genres of fiction in which it is more common (such as young adult contemporary). In the case of non-binary gender, discussion of representation may be extremely recent, but non-binary gender appears in more texts than might be expected.

In chapters one and two of this thesis I will be addressing the representation of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature. In order to gain an understanding of the presence of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature I have read a range of texts from Hope Mirrlees' 1926 *Lud-in-the-Mist* to Linsey Miller's 2018 *Ruin of Stars*.⁶⁶ In this chapter I will be discussing non-binary characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy texts by Julia Ember, Robin Hobb, Robert Jordan, George R. R. Martin, Linsey Miller, William Nicholson, and Christopher Paolini. I approach these texts in chronological order from 1990 to 2017, and anchor my analysis in the societal changes around non-binary gender that have taken place during this time period. Before I begin the chronology, however, the issue of narrative position must be addressed.

Finding Non-Binary Gender

A significant element of the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre's presentation of non-binary gender is the narrative positions or roles in which non-binary characters are placed. The only

⁶⁶ For a list of all the texts consulted during my research, please see Appendix A.

non-binary protagonists I have located in pseudo-medieval fantasy are Miller's Sal and Ember's Tashi, both from texts published in 2017. I will be examining them both in more depth below, but it is important to emphasise here that both Sal and Tashi, unlike previous non-binary characters, are point of view characters and protagonists. They encounter both resistance to and support of their gender, and have their non-binary gender treated as fully real and worthy of respect by the narrative. This is a strong contrast to most of the previous non-binary characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy, who are both literally and figuratively dehumanised as well as being given small or otherwise limited roles in the narrative. This, as will be made clear by the chronology later in this chapter, reflects a number of broader shifts in Western society regarding non-binary gender.

Non-binary characters are not particularly common in any genre of literature, though certain genres offer potential space for them. For example, science fiction can take an exploratory approach to gender, particularly feminist science fiction. Anamarija Šporčič argues that '[w]ith its long history of both utopian and dystopian futures and landscapes, science fiction should be the ideal literary platform for exploring non-binary world'.⁶⁷ This history leaves more room for non-binary characters to emerge – examples include Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Becky Chambers' *A Closed and Common Orbit* (2016). In pseudo-medieval fantasy's strictly gendered worlds, however, non-binary characters are rare and difficult to find.

In this chapter, I will argue that there is a shift in the depiction of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature from monstrous and inhuman to more varied possibilities during the 1990-2017 period that I am focusing on, and that this shift is loosely responsive to

⁶⁷ Šporčič, p. 53.

broader societal shifts in attitude to both non-binary gender specifically and queerness more generally. In order to do so, I will be conducting an overview of the non-binary characters that can be found in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature. This task immediately presents a problem: there are no texts in pre-2017 pseudo-medieval fantasy literature that I have found that label characters as *non-binary*. The word, for reasons discussed below, is not in use in this context – therefore, an investigation must be made into how to identify characters to use in this analysis. On the surface, it seems relatively simple: I have selected characters who in one way or another are indicated to have no gender, a genderless aspect, or more than one gender. These things are indicated often by pronouns, but also sometimes other descriptors.

However, the issue of non-binary gender in fiction is more complex than this surface-level reading, primarily because most of these examples are framed in such a way as to indicate that their gender is an interesting fictional concept rather than a reflecting a non-fictional, existing human gender. In addressing this in this thesis, I have chosen to distinguish between discussing *presentation* and *representation*. The majority of examples that I discuss in this chapter are examples of the *presentation* of non-binary gender – this is the baseline, in which characters simply do not entirely fit into the male/female binary. These examples differ from the comparatively few characters who demonstrate non-binary *representation* – characters who are granted non-binary gender in a similar way to other characters being granted a male or female gender. *Representation* is frequently discussed as a multi-layered subject which is both influenced by and has significant impact on the culture in which the text is being read:

The complex, shifting business of re-presenting, reworking, recombining representations is in tension with the reality to which representation refer and which they affect. This is evident in three ways. Firstly, reality sets limits to what, barring idiosyncratic examples, humans can make it mean. (To mistake a cow for a hat is not just an error in logic.) Secondly, reality is always more extensive and complicated than any system of representation can possibly comprehend and we always sense that this is so – representation never ‘gets’ reality, which is why human history has

produced so many different and changing ways of trying to get it. Thirdly, representations here and now have real consequences for real people, not just in the way they are treated as indicated above but in terms of the way representations delimit and enable what people can be in any given society.⁶⁸

When characters are limited to demonstrating the presentation of non-binary gender alone, non-binary gender is often limited in itself – restricted by its framing as unreal and merely conceptual. Many of these characters are in fact hardly characters at all – they have no depth or development to them, either undifferentiated from the rest of their group (non-binary by species) or reduced entirely to a symbol with little or no active characterisation (non-binary as symbol). Can we, in fact, call these characters non-binary? I would argue that we can, provided a distinction is drawn between presentation and representation, because while many of these examples have the attributes of non-binary gender, they lack the framing of non-binary gender as it is known to exist in reality.

Non-binary gender is a subject that has only more recently begun to receive higher levels of interest – for example, it was only in 2010 the UK’s Equality Act began to account for non-binary people specifically instead of only binary transgender people. This is reflected in literature, with no Western genre of literature having a particularly high quantity of non-binary characters. One aspect of non-binary representation that is more specific to pseudo-medieval fantasy has to do with the genre’s setting. Bearing in mind the “realism” argument often used to defend the genre’s gender and sexuality norms (as discussed in ‘Of Dragons and Bigotry’ in the introduction to this thesis), one can speculate that part of the extremely limited numbers of non-binary characters in the genre (and their absence in the majority of texts) is due to the belief that non-binary characters would be somehow anachronistic in a medieval setting – or at least, the pseudo-medieval aesthetic most commonly seen in the genre.

⁶⁸ Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 3.

Additionally, all the pseudo-medieval fantasy texts that I refer to in this chapter depict primarily cisnormative cultures, and many also depict heteronormative cultures that are largely patriarchal; this aspect of pseudo-medieval fantasy literature is very commonly adhered to, even when non-binary gender is introduced as a concept.

There is, of course, evidence that the traditional Western gender binary is far from the only possible system, though certainly in the Western world this is not often common knowledge. Examples include ‘the “third” sexes of India (the *hijara*) or of North America’.⁶⁹ More information on this history can be found in chapter two of the 2017 reader, *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*.⁷⁰ There are also arguments that the binary gender system is and has always been an oversimplification, and these can be found in mainstream media articles as well in academic texts such as the work of, perhaps most famously, Judith Butler.⁷¹ Nonetheless, it is common to see accusations that non-binary genders are simply “new trends” and in that manner devoid of legitimacy, either stemming from ignorance or from deliberate attempts to discredit them.⁷²

Additionally, to return to the issue of language: the language that surrounds and describes non-binary gender in English is often formed of very recently developed terms (see ‘The Vocabulary of Gender’ in the introduction to this thesis), which seems to disrupt the desired pseudo-medieval aesthetic of the text, causing such language to be avoided. This can create

⁶⁹ John Edwards, *Language and Identity: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 127.

⁷⁰ Vincent and Manzano.

⁷¹ Mey, ‘It’s Time for People to Stop Using the Social Construct of Biological Sex to Defend Their Transmisogyny’, *Autostraddle.com*, 5 June 2014. < <http://www.autostraddle.com/its-time-for-people-to-stop-using-the-social-construct-of-biological-sex-to-defend-their-transmisogyny-240284/> > [accessed 15 December 2015].

⁷² Adrian Ballou, ‘10 Myths About Non-Binary People It’s Time To Unlearn’, *EverydayFeminism.com*, 6 December 2014. < <http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/12/myths-non-binary-people/> > [accessed 15 December 2015].

problems for both writers attempting to include non-binary characters and researchers attempting to find them, as they may not be identified clearly in the text. For most non-binary characters that I have found in pseudo-medieval fantasy, the language used to describe them is oblique and imprecise; sufficiently clear terms have been ignored or rejected, and often the non-binary character in question is not significant enough to the narrative to merit a longer and more explicit explanation. The use of older terms which are now considered slurs occurs too, possibly out of ignorance or in an attempt to have the older language blend in with the historical aesthetic – for example the character Sweets from George R. R. Martin’s ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’ series is referred to as a *hermaphrodite*.⁷³ This term has been identified by the Intersex Society of North America as ‘stigmatizing and misleading’, and is generally considered to be inappropriate.⁷⁴ The High Priest of Helgrind (from Christopher Paolini’s ‘Inheritance Cycle’) is referred to as ‘seemingly sexless’, and little if any further clarification is given.⁷⁵ This lack of linguistic clarity is in turn connected to the genre’s common conflation of gender identity with anatomy: without clear language, concepts of gender identity as distinct from anatomy are often entirely absent, with a character’s gender judged (in the narration or by other characters, though occasionally in the character’s own words) based upon their anatomy or presentation. In searching for non-binary characters in the genre, therefore, I have chosen to include characters that are depicted as (or implied to be) intersex in some way. Although being intersex is not an indicator of non-binary gender, in the context of a genre that frequently fails to separate gender identity from anatomy an investigation of non-binary representation must take intersex characters into account – when gender identity is almost always defined with reference to anatomy, intersex and non-binary characters are

⁷³ George R. R. Martin, *A Dance With Dragons Part Two: After the Feast* (London: Voyager Books, 2011), p. 106.

⁷⁴ Intersex Society of North America, ‘Is a person who is intersex a hermaphrodite?’, (n. d.), <<http://www.isna.org/faq/hermaphrodite>> [accessed 14 April 2022] (para. 2 of 4).

⁷⁵ Christopher Paolini, *Inheritance* (London: Corgi, 2012), p. 288.

quickly rendered indistinguishable. I have chosen to omit from my investigation, however, characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy who disguise themselves as a different gender (often women disguising themselves as men) in order to achieve something (such as J. R. R. Tolkien's Eowyn, George R. R. Martin's Arya Stark, and the multiple examples in Terry Pratchett's *Monstrous Regiment*). Though this is a form of queering gender roles and stereotypes (and in Pratchett's case may also be exploring ideas around binary trans identity), it is not normally tied to non-binary gender identities in any clear way and is thus largely beyond the remit of this thesis.

Another issue worth accounting for when examining any form of queer representation in fiction is the existence of and controversy around the "bury-your-gays" trope. This refers to the trend in fiction of queer characters being much more likely to be killed off than their non-queer counterparts, something that has been studied in both literature and television. The tradition of the tragic queer character whose narrative is resolved only by their death is perhaps most well known in the depiction of homosexuality in Hollywood history:

Once upon a time, gay Hollywood was confined to the claustrophobia of Giovanni's room. Its camera lens was smeared with white cleaning polish, blending gayness into a foggy backdrop, obscuring the lives and existence of homosexuality to outside viewers. Gayness was drenched in darkness – dark rooms, dark bars, dark alleys, and dark endings as the lingering shame required a sacrifice.⁷⁶

More recently, in 2016, international attention was drawn to this trend due to the social media campaigns generated by fans in the aftermath of the death of Lexa – the female love interest of the female lead of the television programme *The 100* – which 'resulted in the show's lowest ratings ever to date' as well as raising almost sixty thousand dollars within eighteen

⁷⁶ Dustin Bradley Goltz, *Queer Temporalities in Gay Male Representation* (London: Routledge, 2010) p. 20.

days for the Trevor Project (a suicide hotline for LGBT+ teenagers).⁷⁷ A little before this, in 2013, James Rawson wrote in *The Guardian* that ‘There are more LGBT characters in mainstream films than ever before, but it might be nice if they were allowed to live’, calculating that in Academy Award-nominated texts there have only been ‘four characters in 19 years’ who had happy endings.⁷⁸ This trend has a number of implications – queer characters having shorter page/screen time is one of them – and it dovetails with the contextual and linguistic reasons that queer characters can be hard to find or identify. In this thesis, I am focusing specifically on non-binary characters, and to my knowledge there are no specific death rate statistics available. However, it is reasonable to judge the likelihood of death for the type of non-binary characters discussed in this chapter as quite high – many are villains who must be vanquished for the narrative to conclude, for example. But this will be explored with each character as the chapter progresses.

With the combination of linguistic ambiguity, so-called historical realism, and the bury-your-gays trope, there is a dearth of major non-binary characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature, and minor characters are also few in number. Overall, when non-binary characters do appear in fantasy they are rarely human but often magical, mystical, or monstrous in ways that are specifically tied to their gender – and they also have specific narrative roles.

The position of characters in the narrative – what roles they have, and how they serve the story – is a matter that is central to my analysis of non-binary representation. As discussed above, the bury-your-gays trope indicates that it is common for queer characters to not

⁷⁷ Erin B. Waggoner, ‘Bury Your Gays and Social Media Fan Response: Television, LGBTQ Representation, and Communitarian Ethics’, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 65.13 (2017), 1877-1891 (p. 1884) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1391015>>.

⁷⁸ James Rawson, ‘Why are gay characters at the top of Hollywood’s kill list?’, *The Guardian*, 11 June 2013. <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2013/jun/11/gay-characters-hollywood-films>> [accessed 16 August 2018] (para. 4 of 8).

survive the story as often as their non-queer counterparts. This is compounded by the fact that queer characters often hold smaller, less central narrative roles, and thus can be more easily removed from the narrative, as well as being more easily trivialised. Additionally, in discussing LGBT representation in fiction for younger readers, Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth and Caitlin L. Ryan state that the majority of representation comes in the form of “token” queer characters, who are separated from the LGBT community and presented as being as “respectable” as possible.⁷⁹ For example, there may be a gay character, but that character is then most likely to be male, white, middle class, able-bodied, thin, and neurotypical.⁸⁰ This is yet another way in which a queer character’s queerness can be obfuscated – by surrounding it by emphasis on traits which are coded as neutral, conservative, or unmarked. Additionally, I have already noted that vague or unclear language often obscures the presence of non-binary characters in fiction. Considering all of these aspects, it is unsurprising that most of the examples I discuss below have fairly minor roles and are not highly visible or central. However, there is another significant type of narrative role that is relevant to queer representation: queer-coded villains.

The understanding that ‘gays and lesbians were often represented on film as sinful, criminal, or sick’ has been discussed as early as Vito Russo’s *The Celluloid Closet* (1981), and it is not unreasonable to consider that this trend extends to the representation of other queer identities, especially given the cultural overlap between gender and sexuality when it comes to the stereotypes about homosexual men and women.⁸¹ The connection between queerness and villain characters is not one-directional; the commonality of queer characters in villain roles

⁷⁹ Jill M. Herman-Wilmarth and Caitlin L. Ryan, ‘Queering Chapter Books with LGBT Characters for Young Readers: Recognizing and Complicating Representations of Homonormativity’, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 37.6 (2016), pp.846-866.

⁸⁰ Herman-Wilmarth and Ryan.

⁸¹ Jonathan Alexander, ‘Straight Eye for the Gay Guy: Composing Queerness’, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 57.6 (2010), 697-729 (p. 699).

has led, over time, to queer-coding being enough to signify a villain in the absence of other information. Harry Benshoff's analysis of queerness and monstrosity in horror deals with ways in which spectators identify with characters, and states that in horror narratives 'homosexuality becomes a subtle but undoubtedly present signifier that usually serves to characterize the villain or monster'.⁸² This signifier is not limited to horror but persists in multiple genres, including fantasy. These characters' role in the narrative is to evoke fear and obstruct the goals of the protagonist, and they must be vanquished by the heroes (in most cases completely destroyed without possibility for redemption or rehabilitation) before the story can be concluded. Their non-binary gender is often aligned with this negative role. The examples that I will be examining in this chapter are Robert Jordan's Myrddraal and Christopher Paolini's High Priest of Helgrind – with reference to other characters such as the demons of Peter V. Brett's 'Demon Cycle' and Mornhavon the Black from Kristen Britain's 'Green Rider' series. In the following chapter I will be unpacking more of the connection between the queer and the monstrous.

Of the twelve pseudo-medieval fantasy examples that I examine there are two villains (Myrddraal, the High Priest of Helgrind), two deities (Sa, the Stranger), two protagonists (Sal, Tashi), one guide to the protagonists (Jumper), and one background character (Sweets). These examples all fall into three broader categories: villains, protagonists, and guides. I approach these characters in an approximately chronological order, in order to examine the changes in the depiction of non-binary gender in the genre over time.

⁸² Harry Benshoff, 'The Monster and the Homosexual', in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), pp. 226-240 (p. 232).

Myrddraal (Robert Jordan)

Robert Jordan's *The Eye of the World* was first published in 1990 as the start of a fourteen-volume series called 'Wheel of Time'; the series concluded in 2013 with the final books being completed by Brandon Sanderson after Jordan's death in 2007. In *The Eye of the World*, the Myrddraal are inherently evil beings, echoing the Black Riders of *The Lord of the Rings*. They are presumed to be all one gender and referred to initially by the genderless pronoun *it*: 'The Halfman will discover we are gone soon enough. There is no need to make things any easier for it than we must'.⁸³ Their potentially genderless nature is however made uncertain by the use of terms such as 'Halfman'⁸⁴ or 'Shadowman'⁸⁵ to refer to them; in later books of the series they are more strongly categorised as male. This would seem to reflect less non-binary identity than it does the unknown nature of the Myrddraal – as the series progresses and they become more familiar characters, the male marker becomes more common. This is another echo of the Black Riders of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, which were once human and male. The Myrddraal are therefore primarily male, with the use of *it* adding to their monstrous nature rather than establishing a non-binary identity.

The Myrddraal demonstrate one way in which non-binary gender is both present and not present in many pseudo-medieval fantasy texts. The non-binary element is not one that reflects twenty-first century understandings of non-binary gender (or even understandings from 1990, when the text was published); it is not depicted as simply an unusual but valid gender. Instead, its presence is supplementary to the Myrddraal's role as villains, in which the removal of gender is used to create fear. If the person pursuing the protagonists is of uncertain gender, specifically in a way that also implies uncertain humanity, that can add to

⁸³ Robert Jordan, *The Eye of the World*, (London: Orbit, 2014), p. 120.

⁸⁴ Jordan, p. 120.

⁸⁵ Jordan, p. 23.

the scale of the threat and the sense of the monstrous. The association between an interruption of conventional binary gender norms and the monstrous is frequently discussed in transgender studies, as it informs a significant part of reactions to transgender and non-binary people in Western society. Susan Stryker describes this as follows:

Because most people have great difficulty in recognizing the humanity of another person if they cannot recognize that person's gender, encounters with gender-changing or gender-challenging people can sometimes feel for others like an encounter with a monstrous and frightening unhumanness. That gut-level reaction can manifest as panic, disgust, contempt, hatred, or outrage, which may then translate into physical or emotional violence – up to and including murder – being directed against the person who is perceived as not-quite-human.⁸⁶

Stryker is describing the way in which cisnormative gender is considered to be fundamental to a person's humanity, something which is examined by Judith Butler as a feature of the need for cultural intelligibility.⁸⁷ Gender and humanity are perceived as intertwined, but only if that gender is comprehensible within a cisnormative framework; without this, the monstrous is evoked. This particular expression of transphobia serves very functionally as a way of creating a monster in a piece of fiction – the lack of a recognisable gender is expected to provoke fear, disgust, or other negative reactions in the reader, which works well to help create a character who is meant to be threatening. The depiction does not even have to be particularly explicit; the simple use of *it* in Jordan's work is enough to evoke it, marking the Myrddraal as disturbing and monstrous. For a fictional character this does not, of course, provoke violence from the reader – but it does stand as part of the reason that violence towards the Myrddraal is considered appropriate, desirable, and even necessary in order to resolve the narrative.

⁸⁶ Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, p. 8.

⁸⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge Classics, 2008), p. 22.

The Myrddraal are so evil as to be both figuratively and literally inhuman, and as part of this, their gender does not resemble the “acceptable” male/female binary. As discussed in more detail in chapter two of this thesis, this is something closely tied to the idea that evil can be mapped onto the body. Work such as Sami Schalk’s analysis of the ways in which ‘[p]hysical deformity or impairment has often been traditionally seen as connected to a bad mental or spiritual state of being’ examines this concept as part of disability studies, a field in which it has considerable impact.⁸⁸ The concept of a strong tie between physicality and identity is part of the long history of analysis of the monstrous, with perhaps the most famous example being Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in which ‘[t]he Creature’s appearance signals his monstrosity’.⁸⁹ Appearance, then, is key to this – the way in which a character is perceived as physically appearing by the other characters around them, which in fantasy literature particularly can be changeable or based in things other than a physical body. Jordan’s Myrddraal, with their lack of eyes and unnatural strength, entangle the concept of physical deformity implying an evil nature with the concept of non-binary gender being an element of the monstrous. If gender, too, is categorised as derived from the body, then a non-normative gender can be used to indicate a non-normative mental or moral state. Jack Halberstam has written about this element of the monstrous in the horror genre: ‘within contemporary horror, the monster, for various reasons, tends to show clearly the markings of deviant sexualities and gendering’.⁹⁰ This trend of the monster showing aspects of non-normative gender is the counterpart to non-normative gender indicating a monster, as both concepts feed each other. This is particularly relevant when there is, for example, little other representation of non-

⁸⁸ Sami Schalk, ‘What Makes Mr. Hyde So Scary?: Disability as a Result of Evil and Cause of Fear’, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 28.4 (2008), (para. 5 of 9) <<https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v28i4.145>>.

⁸⁹ Lester D. Friedman and Allison B. Kavey, *Monstrous Progeny: A History of Frankenstein Narratives* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2016), p. 40.

⁹⁰ Jack Halberstam, ‘Parasites and Perverts: An Introduction to Gothic Monstrosity’, in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), pp. 148-170 (p. 150).

binary gender. If non-binary gender is primarily seen in monstrous characters, then any indication of non-binary gender begins to imply the presence of the monstrous. This connection is clear with the evil of the Myrddraal in the 1990s but can still be seen in the 2000s with the High Priest of Helgrind, and other minor examples such as Kristen Britain's Mornhavon the Black and Peter V. Brett's demons. With these monstrous characters, their non-binary gender is an indicator of their villainy, or at least of their changeable and uncertain nature. This is something that evokes the aspects of transphobia described by Stryker, particularly the way in which transphobia can emerge from a cisgender person reading an encounter with a transgender person as 'an encounter with a monstrous and frightening unhumanness'.⁹¹ Other facets of this include the idea of the transgender or non-binary person as inherently deceitful or untrustworthy, for example, which is present even in more benign characters like Jumper (from William Nicholson's *Firesong*, discussed below).

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) has had a significant impact on discussions of gender, particularly in its discussion of disruptions to the gender binary. While this specific work will not have had a direct influence on *The Eye of the World* (as they were both published in the same year), it nevertheless discusses some very relevant points. Non-binary characters are often classed as what Butler refers to as "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons', and in many texts this is enough to make their gender or lack thereof synonymous with evil that must be destroyed in order to resolve the narrative.⁹² The idea of incoherence and lack of continuity aligns with this type of monstrosity – the monstrosity of the Other. The monstrous violates the structure of the norm, but in doing so it can, paradoxically, reinforce the norm – that is, the structure of the norm re-establishes and

⁹¹ Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, p. 8.

⁹² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 23.

secures itself by Othering the supposedly monstrous (or by making the Other monstrous). This is visible through the way in which this ‘monstrous and frightening unhumanness’ is used as a major part of the depiction of the Myrddraal: the monstrous, frightening nature of the Myrddraal is demonstrated as a contrast to the normativity of the protagonists, and each of its deviations from the norm are held up as motivations to conform to the norm.⁹³ This reveals that there are options outside a given normative structure (for example, options of gender other than male or female), but it does so in such a way as to forbid or deter people from these alternate options. This reduces the non-binary gender in the text to a simple tool – a method by which to achieve a certain effect and lacking any complexity beyond that.

However, the theoretical concept most relevant here is ‘Othering’. The concept of ‘Othering’ is intrinsic to the presentation of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature. It is interconnected with what Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson described in 1996 as ‘a key issue in contemporary feminist theory and practice: whether, and how, we should represent members of groups to which we do not ourselves belong – in particular, members of groups oppressed in ways we are not’.⁹⁴ Unlike in Kitzinger and Wilkinson’s work, however, which centres on intersectional feminist research of Othered groups and individuals, I will be looking at fictional representations and focusing on how this *has* been done rather than how it *should* be done. In pseudo-medieval fantasy, the Myrddraal and later characters are a particularly clear example of Othering – and this Othering is not entirely straightforward. The Myrddraal are Othered by the narrative and by the protagonists – they are rejected, unwanted, and dismissed, due to their evil nature. The question that Othering raises, however, is this: are these characters Othered because they are evil, or are they “evil” because they are Othered?

⁹³ Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, p. 8.

⁹⁴ Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson, ‘1: Representing the Other’, in *Representing the Other: A Feminism & Psychology Reader*, ed. by Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1996), pp. 1-32 (p. 1).

In the case of some characters the answer is never given, and in any case depends on the interpretation of the text; instead the reader is left with ambiguity. Given that the Myrddraal act against the protagonists it can be more strongly argued that they are simply Othered because they are evil, but Othering is also often evoked by narratives of transphobia (as well as other forms of bigotry), and therefore when the Myrddraal are framed as both evil *and* non-binary, the distinction between the two is not made clearly. Both evil characters and non-binary characters are Othered, and these characters are both evil and non-binary – but the nature of that Othering is different in each case, and in conflating the two complexity is erased and non-binary is placed in the same category as evil as though they are connected.

While this is perhaps a reflection of contemporary dismissals of non-binary gender – the non-binary characters only ‘appear to be persons’ – it also becomes complicit in dismissing non-binary gender as unacceptable.⁹⁵ The Myrddraal are the enemy of goodness, of peace, of everything the protagonists seek, and must therefore be prevailed over before the narrative can resolve happily, something we see in several other non-binary examples in pseudo-medieval fantasy further below. Non-binary characters are often Othered by how they are placed in the narrative, but also, as discussed above, by being non-human. Non-binary is framed as being so Other to human experience that it is only permitted to non-human beings.

The Myrddraal could be described as being non-binary by dint of their species; the remaining examples in the 1990s offer a different type of non-binary character: the non-binary character as a symbol. This category describes characters with a non-binary gender that is part of their function as a symbol in the text. While any character can be symbolic, for these characters their symbolic role is their primary function in the text – or, at least, the symbolism of their

⁹⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 23.

non-binary gender is treated as the primary reason for and purpose of that gender. I have located two examples of these characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy texts: the Stranger, from George R. R. Martin's 'A Song of Ice and Fire' series, and Sa, from Robin Hobb's 'Realm of the Elderlings' series. Both of these characters are deities, continuing the trend of non-binary characters being primarily non-human.

The Stranger (George R. R. Martin)

George R. R. Martin's 'A Song of Ice and Fire' series began in 1996 and is still ongoing at the time of writing, with five books released so far. There are multiple religions and a wide variety of deities in 'A Song of Ice and Fire', and the Stranger is part of a specific pantheon known as the Seven. Although it is stated that, similar to the two previous examples, in this religion '*God is one [...] with seven aspects*' (italics in original), they are much more commonly referred to in the plural as gods and often treated as separate entities.⁹⁶ As a single deity with seven aspects, they could be considered a multi-gender symbol of wholeness like Sa (below). But when broken down into seven separate entities as they more commonly are in the series, the pantheon consists of three female deities (the Mother, the Maid, and the Crone), three male deities (the Father, the Warrior, and the Smith), and the Stranger, who is 'neither male nor female, yet both, ever the outcast, the wanderer from far places, less and more than human, unknown and unknowable'.⁹⁷ Instead of symbolising wholeness, the Stranger symbolises death and the unknown, and is most commonly depicted as having no identifiable gender (rather than aspects of both) – one image of the face of the Stranger is described as 'a black oval, a shadow with stars for eyes'.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ George R. R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings* (London: Voyager Books, 2011), p. 449.

⁹⁷ Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, p. 449.

⁹⁸ Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, p. 449.

Which of the Seven that a character chooses to pray to is often used as a way to indicate that character's state of mind, but otherwise they have little impact. Throughout the first five books of 'A Song of Ice and Fire' the Stranger, along with the rest of the Seven, becomes neither a driving force behind other aspects of the plot (as Hobb's Sa is for Wintrow) nor an independently acting character (like Nicholson's Jumper) but remains almost entirely a symbol, with their significance somewhat ambiguous. Non-binary gender used as a symbol is far from new – we can find resemblance to non-binary symbolism as far back as ancient mythology, particularly in depictions of the trickster figure. Lewis Hyde points out that '[w]e constantly distinguish – right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead – and in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction'.⁹⁹ The trickster figure is a category or archetype which allows for disruption to all kinds of social and cultural norms including those surrounding gender identity, gender presentation, and gender roles. Although not all trickster figures explore forms of gender-related transformation or genderfluidity, some of those who may be considered to do so include Cufalh (Nivakle, Paraguay), Legba (Fon, West Africa: Benin), Nafigi (Kalapalo, Central Brazil), Tatú Bolite (Moscovi, Argentina), Taugi (Kalapalo, Central Brazil), and Loki (Scandinavia).¹⁰⁰

While the Stranger's role is not as active within the narrative as that of most trickster figures, their depiction is built on a series of unresolved contradictions that echo some of Hyde's descriptions – as 'neither male nor female, yet both, ever the outcast, the wanderer from far places, less and more than human, unknown and unknowable'.¹⁰¹ The Stranger's existence is

⁹⁹ Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture*, (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2008), p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ Kimberly A. Christen, *Clowns & Tricksters: An Encyclopedia of Tradition and Culture* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1998).

¹⁰¹ Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, p. 449.

one which enacts Hyde's description of the trickster as one who crosses lines and confuses distinction.

The idea that the Stranger is 'neither male nor female, yet both' is what allows them to be categorised as non-binary.¹⁰² Being neither male nor female is a way of being non-binary, but so is being *both* – a binary like the gender binary does not consider an embodiment of both genders to be permissible, and it is a breach of that binary to include both in one person, and therefore considered non-binary, as discussed in the introduction. Richards, Bowman, and Barker in *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders* describe this particularly simply by stating that '[e]ssentially, of course, genderqueer or non-binary people are simply people who are not male or female'.¹⁰³ The Stranger is not male *or* female; the Stranger is both, which is not acceptable in a cisnormative framework. As with many of the contradictions listed in the Stranger's description, this phrase is an attempt to indicate the indescribable – to show that the language available does not fully accommodate the concept in question, because as a deity the Stranger is past human understanding. This plays into some of Butler's discussion of the metaphysics of substance in *Gender Trouble* – she states 'that "persons" only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility'.¹⁰⁴ In 'A Song of Ice and Fire' this is demonstrated, as any 'gender intelligibility' of the Stranger is deliberately avoided and the Stranger is thus rendered as a deity beyond common comprehension.¹⁰⁵ This echoes Butler's work on gender as performance: the idea that there is no such thing as pre-existing gender, as all of it is constructed and performed. The Stranger is not only fictional, the Stranger is also not granted independent thought or agency within their fictional text – all the Stranger is and can be is the

¹⁰² Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, p. 449.

¹⁰³ Richards, Bouman and Barker, 'Introduction', p. 5.

¹⁰⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 22.

interpretation of others, both to the reader and to other characters within the text. The text gives us no concept of how the Stranger perceives themselves, and while this is not uncommon – indeed, it is the case for many non-central fictional characters – it is worth noting that in this case it aligns closely with the tendency for non-binary characters to be granted little to no interiority or agency in the texts in which they appear.

The Stranger's Otherness is emphasised as 'ever the outcast, the wanderer from far places', a second phrase that plays with contradiction. The Stranger is an outcast (one who was part of a group and has been pushed out) but also a wanderer from far places (one who has come into a group from outside), and while those two concepts are not mutually exclusive, they nevertheless repeat the motif of the Stranger containing opposites, inversions, and contradictions that is seen throughout their description. This aspect of their description is also quite negative – the outcast is an unwanted and rejected figure, the wanderer is from 'far places' and does not, therefore, entirely belong. Even the name of the Stranger adds to this – unlike the invented name of Sa, the Stranger's name is a noun (an unfamiliar person) as well as an adjective (something more peculiar than something else). Mentions of the Stranger often include discomfort, such as this conversation between Sam and Gilly about the Seven:

“Did you only sing of six gods? Craster always told us you southrons had seven.”
“Seven,” he agreed, “but no one sings of the Stranger.” The Stranger's face was the face of death. Even talking of him made Sam uncomfortable.¹⁰⁶

The Stranger is depicted as representing the unknown, but the uncomfortable and the unwanted – and all of these things align with the idea of non-binary gender as discomfiting, as outside of acceptable societal norms, and as impossible to understand, as seen in the previous example of the Myrddraal. Lewis Hyde states that '[e]very group has its edge, its

¹⁰⁶ George R. R. Martin, *A Storm of Swords Part Two: Blood and Gold* (London: HarperCollins, 2011), p. 72.

sense of in and out, and trickster is always there, at the gates of the city and the gates of life’, and the Stranger occupies a similar type of space here.¹⁰⁷ The Otherness of the Stranger is significant but, given the Stranger’s position as a deity, somewhat differing from the Othering of other non-binary characters. The Stranger has status as well as Otherness, perhaps specifically because part of the purpose of the Stranger is less to *be* an Other as it is to represent the possibility of Otherness. The Stranger’s position echoes some of Butler’s discussion of the idea of “intelligible” gender:

“Intelligible” genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire. In other words, the spectres of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the “expression” or “effect” of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice.¹⁰⁸

The Stranger is, almost literally, a spectre ‘of discontinuity and incoherence’ – in gender, in representing the unknown, in the attempts to depict them.¹⁰⁹ They are representative of what cannot be permitted in supposedly normal life, and they are produced at least in part by the need to label and identify that which is not considered normal. While incoherent and lacking cultural intelligibility, they remain necessary to the normative structure, demonstrating what is accepted and intelligible by being rejected and unintelligible. In the Stranger, Butler’s concept of cultural intelligibility and its absence is reflected alongside the Stranger’s role as a trickster figure. Hyde argues that ‘the origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures require that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that cultures are based on’; the Stranger is a necessary aspect of the Seven and the society that

¹⁰⁷ Hyde, p. 7.

¹⁰⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 23.

¹⁰⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 23.

they are situated in, even as they push against its boundaries, and this is specifically tied into their non-binary gender.¹¹⁰

It is very interesting that the description of the Stranger above includes the phrase ‘less and more than human’ – most of the examples of non-binary gender discussed in this chapter are non-human, an issue that will be discussed in depth in chapter two of this thesis, but one that typically revolves around lack of adherence to the gender binary being something *lesser*, which the Stranger’s description includes but is not limited by. In contrast, in the context of describing a god, ‘less than human’ is a particularly strange choice. Kimberly A. Christen describes trickster figures as ‘at the same time obscene and powerful, jester and culture hero’ and states that they ‘personify the ability to be both respected and condemned by society’.¹¹¹ That the Stranger is permitted to be ‘both respected and condemned’ shifts their narrative position from deity into the trickster role with its internal contradictions. Deities are typically worshipped and revered; in this context *more* than human is to be expected (see Sa below) but *less* than human is bizarre. Again, this returns to the boundary-crossing existence of the Stranger by means of contradiction. However, the use of *less* as well as *more* in this description is appropriate not just to the Stranger but also to characters like Sa and non-binary shapeshifter characters like Jumper. These characters are *less* than the human characters in many ways – less moral, less important to the narrative, granted less depth of characterisation or less autonomy – but also, simultaneously, they are *more* – more powerful as deities, more knowledgeable about the world.

¹¹⁰ Hyde, p. 9.

¹¹¹ Kimberly A. Christen, *Clowns & Tricksters: An Encyclopedia of Tradition and Culture*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1998), p. xii.

In contrast with Sa, whose non-binary wholeness is viewed as a goal to work towards (if an ultimately unachievable one), the Stranger is presented as specifically ‘unknown and unknowable’ in a way that does not allow for imitation. The Stranger is granted no face in depictions of the Seven, with alternatives such as ‘a black oval, a shadow with stars for eyes’ in place instead.¹¹² The Stranger is out of reach, and the emphasis on this in a non-binary character leaves non-binary gender not just associated with the non-human but inaccessible to humans. Non-binary gender may be an option, but not for a human character – it is presented as being a firmly fantastical element.

The Stranger’s unknowable nature is, of course, tied to their position as a god of death – which returns us once more to the idea of the monstrous, or at least to the non-binary character as someone to be afraid of. It also positions the Stranger on another boundary – the Stranger stands at the end or edge of normality, of gender, and of life. The Stranger is a psychopomp, a deity or mythological figure ‘who led the newly dead to the other world’, crossing from life to death.¹¹³ This is yet another aspect of the Stranger’s depiction that adds to their character’s power while simultaneously pushing them into the role of the Other and the monstrous. This inclusion of both power and Othering in one character can also be seen in another non-binary character: Sa.

Sa (Robin Hobb)

Robin Hobb’s ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ series, published from 1995-2017, is the source of the character Beloved – the primary focus of chapters three and four of this thesis. In this chapter, however, my focus is on Sa, a different character from Hobb’s series. Sa is the sole

¹¹² Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, p. 449.

¹¹³ Martin, *A Storm of Swords Part Two: Blood and Gold*, p. 276.

deity of the predominant religion in the southern areas of the fictional world, and is believed by his/her followers to have both a male aspect and a female aspect. This is frequently and consistently used to symbolise wholeness: to 'be one with Sa' is the greatest ambition of a priest of Sa.¹¹⁴ This exploration of the drive for wholeness is common throughout most of the series, with some major narrative points surrounding fully embracing the magic of the Skill (which, unlike in the worship of Sa, leads to the death of the individual). The bigender wholeness of Sa is treated by the text and certain characters as desirable but unreachable, and the resulting struggle is demonstrated most clearly by Wintrow Vestrit's part of the narrative in the 'Liveship Traders' trilogy.¹¹⁵ Wintrow struggles with his desire to be one with Sa (or as close to such a thing as possible), something that is highlighted particularly when a ship-board accident requires Wintrow to have the finger on which he might have worn a priest's ring removed. This physical change parallels the lack of wholeness in his own life and initially creates another perceived barrier between Wintrow and the wholeness of Sa, though his attitude does change over time to give the incident a different, less restrictive significance.

Either way, though Sa has no depicted perspective or autonomy and throughout the series is more of a symbol than a character, he/she is nevertheless an important driving force behind parts of the narrative. It is important to note that Sa's bigender nature is *not* part of Wintrow's struggle. Pronouns are used to indicate the importance of a belief in Sa to specific characters; Sa is normally referred to as *he* or *she* by Wintrow and the others who belong to cultures in which the worship of Sa predominates (usually male characters use *he* and female characters use *she*), but this becomes *it* when Sa is being criticised by outsiders: 'Sa, the god that fucks itself'.¹¹⁶ The bigender nature of 'Sa, whom we men worship as Father of All, [and] is still Sa

¹¹⁴ Robin Hobb, *Ship of Magic* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 508.

¹¹⁵ For clarity on the order of the series, please see Appendix B.

¹¹⁶ Robin Hobb, *Blood of Dragons* (London: HarperCollins, 2011), p. 311.

when women call on her as Mother of All' is most commonly evoked in order to demonstrate the increasing misogyny of the surrounding culture – as it grows more sexist, Sa is most often referred to as male and his/her female aspect is frequently downplayed or ignored.¹¹⁷ This is a reflection of the way in which many different binary dynamics can exist beside and inside one another, such as the Self/Other dynamic of cisgender/non-binary and the Self/Other dynamic of male/female. Simone de Beauvoir, writing *The Second Sex*, frames gender as not just a binary but a hierarchy, with the female beneath the male – and that framing not only does not account for non-binary gender, it does not permit its existence at all.¹¹⁸ Sa, being non-binary and both, is a defiance of that binary – and the reaction *against* Sa's non-binary gender does not only deny its existence, it explicitly enforces the misogynistic hierarchy as it does so.

It is worth noting that both the Stranger and Sa come from works that were published within a surprisingly small timespan – Martin's 'A Song of Ice and Fire' series began in 1996, and the first of Hobb's 'Realm of the Elderlings' books to feature Sa was *Ship of Magic* in 1998. It is possible that this simply reflects intertextuality – it is plausible that authors writing in the same genre would be aware of each other's work and for there to be some overlap of ideas in this way. However, it is also notable that these works were being written and published at a time when concepts of gender are beginning to be interrogated on a more widespread basis. From Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990 to the growth of queer, transgender, and non-binary activism movements that continue to evolve through the 2010s, this greater cultural conversation resulted in significant societal changes such as the implementation of the Gender Recognition Act in the UK in 2005. It is perhaps unsurprising that texts written

¹¹⁷ Hobb, *Ship of Magic*, p. 310.

¹¹⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

during the 1990s are beginning to feature ideas about non-binary gender, if only in limited roles.

Both non-binary characters framed as a symbol are deities; both remain silent throughout their respective texts, spoken to by characters but not shown to be speaking or acting themselves. Neither of these characters are explicitly villains, and neither of them die, in sharp contrast to other examples. It is possible that the symbolic nature of the characters is what protects them – while individuals who disrupt the cis- and heteronormative culture are removed as part of the resolution of the narrative (as will be discussed below), characters such as Sa and the Stranger are viewed as symbols before they are viewed as anything else, if the latter occurs at all. The symbols are then preservable as they are metaphors rather than active characters, and do not disrupt the narrative enough that they must be removed.

Both of these non-binary-as-symbol characters take the role of guides, and their non-binary gender also becomes a way of demonstrating their narrative role. These guides are, specifically, gods, and their non-binary gender is tied to the type of deity that they are and what they are expected to symbolise or represent. We are told that Sa is both ‘Father of All’ and ‘Mother of All’, and through this and other moments in the text understand that Sa’s bigender nature is intended to symbolise an all-encompassing wholeness.¹¹⁹ The Stranger, of course, is in a sense the perpetual Other. Symbolising the unknown and death, the Stranger is ‘neither male or female, yet both, ever the outcast, the wanderer from far places, less and more than human, unknown and unknowable’.¹²⁰ Neither Sa nor the Stranger appear in person in their respective texts, nor are they given anything in the way of direct

¹¹⁹ Hobb, *Ship of Magic*, p. 310.

¹²⁰ Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, p. 449.

characterisation beyond what is needed for the functions they serve as focuses of belief; all the characterisation they do have beyond that is projected on them by their believers. The narrative roles of these gods are to support, inspire, or motivate the other characters in the text by dint of their power or what they symbolise, without much any direct interaction or appearances. Indeed, when we do have a character in this period who acts directly upon the narrative, they must be removed in order to resolve said narrative – the Myrddraal, who are explicitly evil.

In the 1990s we have three examples: the Myrddraal, the Stranger, and Sa. The first is a villainous monster, the other two are deities with no direct action or interaction depicted – all three of them are examples of non-binary gender being used as a tool to evoke or symbolise something. Non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy, it seems, is more of a theoretical concept than it is something a person might be. There is no depiction of a non-binary character who has made their own choices, whose internal perspective we are privy to, or whose self-identification is prioritised over the way they are categorised by the other characters. This begins to change as we move into the 2000s, with two characters who demonstrate choice in different ways: William Nicholson's Jumper, and Christopher Paolini's High Priest of Helgrind.

Jumper (William Nicholson)

William Nicholson's 'The Wind on Fire' trilogy was published from 2000-2003. Jumper is introduced in the third book (*Firesong*) as one of the magically powerful and somewhat mysterious Singer people. While the pronoun *he* is most commonly used when referring to him, his non-binary nature is emphasised repeatedly: 'What sort of thing is he anyway? Is he

man or woman? Or something else altogether, for which we need a new name?'.¹²¹ Jumper's physical form is what most obviously shifts, but his own identification would be appear to be non-binary:

The creature was certainly human [...] you couldn't quite get a fix on any part of him [...] Sometimes he looked like a little middle-aged man, sometimes like a ten-year-old-girl [...] No part of him ever came to rest, but was always changing, becoming something else. It was no use asking Jumper himself who or what he was, because he would only reply, with his eager-to-please smile, 'What would you like me to be?'¹²²

Jumper's non-binary gender is used largely to distance him from the protagonists, rendering him a 'small, soft creature' who the other characters do not attempt to grow familiar with.¹²³

At the same time, he is 'certainly human'.¹²⁴ Literally human, then, but simultaneously Othered – as with Paolini's High Priest (below), his depiction distances him from the other characters, and his non-binary gender is used as part of the way to achieve that. This depiction centres his gender around Jumper's ability to change shape (or change how his shape is perceived – the text is unclear) using magic, and does not provide any more details about the relation between this and his own internal sense of gender. In academic work on science fiction, there has been some discussion of non-binary gender and humanity – specifically in the light of non-binary gender being ascribed to non-human characters, as Šporčić discusses:

...when they come accompanied by the baggage of playing the Other to the human race, the message to a non-binary readership can only be bitter-sweet, as the non-binary characters in science fiction, despite apparent representation and visibility, are often unable to fully serve as sources of empowerment for anyone wishing to identify with them.¹²⁵

¹²¹ William Nicholson, *Firesong* (London: Egmont Books Limited, 2003), p. 3.

¹²² Nicholson, p. 4.

¹²³ Nicholson, p. 205.

¹²⁴ Nicholson, p. 4.

¹²⁵ Šporčić, p. 64.

Šporčič's description reflects the type of non-binary character we have already discussed – the Myrddraal, the Stranger, and Sa are all non-human, and all play an Othered role in varying ways (though there is little sweet about the Myrddraal's depiction). This is not precisely the situation in Nicholson's text, as Jumper is confirmed in the text as human. However, Šporčič's point is still applicable. Jumper's humanity has to be asserted in the text when no other character's does, because Jumper's gender indicates a difference, an Othering, from humanity. And throughout the text, he is continually in the position of 'playing the Other' as he guides the other characters: never quite understood, never quite accepted, always generating a degree of discomfort in those around him.¹²⁶ Following the previous examples of the Myrddraal, the Stranger, and Sa, Jumper's depiction is much closer to the idea that non-binary gender is part of the human experience. Simultaneously, however, a line is drawn: this human character (Jumper) can be non-binary, but only as part of their magic, rather than as part of their humanity.

Butler states that 'gender ontologies always operate within established political contexts as normative injunctions, determining what qualifies as intelligible sex, invoking and consolidating the reproductive constraints on sexuality, setting the prescriptive requirements whereby sexed or gendered bodies come into cultural intelligibility.'¹²⁷ Cultural intelligibility is often considered a requirement; if a person does not have cultural intelligibility (for example, because they do not conform to cisnormativity within a cisnormative culture), then they are Othered and prevented from being fully accepted into a given community. This idea of *intelligibility* is visible in Jumper's depiction – while unlike Sa, or the Stranger, or the Myrddraal, Jumper is both active in the text and benign, his non-binary gender nevertheless

¹²⁶ Šporčič, p. 64.

¹²⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 203.

drives much of his lack of cultural intelligibility. He simply is not fully comprehensible to the other characters.

This seems, at first, to be a contradiction of his narrative role. Jumper, despite not being a deity like Sa or the Stranger, performs a similar role albeit with more character interaction: he is a guide for the protagonists who does little more than make sure the other characters do what they are required to do. Jumper gets very little personality description beyond being ‘relentlessly, unstoppably good-tempered’, and does not develop as a character.¹²⁸ Jumper is also clearly positioned as someone with greater understanding of the world than the characters around him. In this we see an echo of Sa – the wisdom of the non-binary character, who acts as a guide to the other characters, and whose gender is associated with their greater knowledge and understanding even as they are in some ways dismissed. Jumper, of course, actively participates in the narrative in a way that Sa does not, and this allows for an extra level of sophistication – but this potential is not explored in any particular way. The discomfort that other characters demonstrate around Jumper distances them from him; but, at the same time, that discomfort is part of his position as a guide, as it stems from his familiarity with ideas beyond their understanding, not least of which is his non-binary gender. Halberstam in *In a Queer Time and Place* discusses how ‘[q]ueer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction’.¹²⁹ Queerness can represent not just the Other as a figure that imposes itself upon the existing norms, but as a signpost to the possibilities of difference and change. The queer figure does not represent only themselves, but also all the potential generated from disrupting or setting aside hetero- and cisnormativity. Jumper’s narrative role is as a guide,

¹²⁸ Nicholson, p. 4.

¹²⁹ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, p. 1.

but a guide who is taking the protagonists specifically from their familiar, comfortable surroundings into a new environment both physically and intellectually. In this way, Jumper is very much a queer disruption, evoking the trickster role. Hyde describes the trickster as being ‘the spirit of the doorway leading out’, and this is something that Jumper is able to embody in his role as a guide.¹³⁰ Jumper’s queerness indicates the potential of breaking away from the normative world of the protagonists, with all the discomfort and change that could thereby ensue.

Jumper’s question, ‘What would you like me to be?’ is also worth addressing.¹³¹ Jumper’s ability to physically transform is something he uses in order to become the type of person that someone else most needs. Tellingly, Jumper’s use of it appears to be limited (in regards to gender) to presenting as specifically male or specifically female. According to the definition of non-binary given earlier, that one person embodying more than one gender is absolutely in defiance of the gender binary, Jumper still meets the definition of non-binary. But in depicting Jumper so that of all the versions of himself that other people would like him to be are singularly male or female, Nicholson is making visible the discomfort that the text and the other characters have with non-binary gender. Regardless of what one of the other characters needs (guidance, comfort, enthusiasm, etc), it always manifests as *either male or female*, and the revelation of Jumper’s full identity provokes uncertainty and mistrust. What other characters would like is for Jumper to *not be non-binary*. There is no specific overall push for Jumper to be male, or to be female, only for him to stop being non-binary – whether this is expected to be resolved by Jumper becoming cisgender, leaving, or even dying is unclear. The rejection of non-binary gender is all that is visible. Bowman and the other main

¹³⁰ Hyde, p. 6.

¹³¹ Nicholson, p. 4.

characters see Jumper as he is, and it makes them uncomfortable, in contrast to the minor characters who only see Jumper being who they would like him to be. Jumper's gender presentation is framed as being explicitly for the benefit of those around him, and while it is not impossible that this goal simply happens to align with Jumper's own desires, neither is it ever explicitly stated that that is the case.

As we have seen with characters such as Sa or the Stranger, the gender of some non-binary characters is tied to something other than simple personal preference and self-identification (which in some characters may not be present at all) – specifically in this case, the requirements of the characters around them and the situation they find themselves in. This raises questions about power, and specifically about whose perspective is viewed as valid. In every example so far – and, indeed, every example until 2017's Sal – the perspective framed as valid is consistently the cisgender one. Not always framed as correct, necessarily – Jumper is implied to be wiser than the other characters, which allows room to interpret the other characters' understanding of his gender as flawed – but as reasonable, and acceptable, even if in error. Even if incorrect, the perspective of the cisgender main character is the one that is prioritised by the narrative. And Jumper's shifts in presentation being reflective of other peoples' needs evokes that. He is changing in order to appease, to please, rather than to suit himself. The impact of perspective on the depiction of a non-binary character is something I will address in more depth in chapter four.

Jumper's gender is often a point of derision or embarrassment to the other characters. Firstly Albard, the much-weakened villain of the book that preceded *Firesong*, refers to Jumper as a 'blob-faced man-woman'.¹³² Secondly, Bowman at one point asks Jumper to wait a distance

¹³² Nicholson, p. 225.

away from his social group because ‘at this heartwrenching moment [...] he did not want a small round-faced man-woman making his departure look ridiculous’.¹³³ This subject is a rare one upon which Bowman (protagonist) and Albard (former villain) agree without question or discussion, and their reactions indicate a considerable amount of uneasiness with Jumper’s non-binary gender is understandable even when the characters in question have opposing stances on most other subjects. Jay Stewart discusses this urge to clarify gender into binary categories in the form of a question and an answer: ‘Why do we need to know the sex of a baby when it’s born? The answer is that we need to know how to attribute gender performances to that baby. We will need to use certain pronouns, buy it certain clothes and toys, and paint its room a certain colour’.¹³⁴ This is building on what Stewart refers to as Butler’s idea that ‘gender comes before sex and not the other way around’.¹³⁵ Jumper’s depiction denies a great deal of this clarity to the other characters and the reader by refusing to allow a binary answer. Specifically, by changing constantly, and by giving no answer to ‘who are you?’ except another question, Jumper prompts questions about truth and reality – and in turn, evokes ideas about deception.

The idea of transgender people being fundamentally deceptive is common transphobic narrative. In ‘Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion’, Talia Mae Bettcher states:

I am specifically concerned with the ways in which victims of transphobic violence can be subject to blame shifting through accusations of deceptions and the way in which transphobic violence may be understood in terms of the related notions of ‘exposure,’ ‘discovery,’ ‘appearance,’ and ‘reality.’ [...] I am concerned with the rhetoric of deception. Rage at having “been deceived” may play a role in some transphobic hostility, interwoven, of course, with homophobic and possibly sexist

¹³³ Nicholson, p. 206.

¹³⁴ Jay Stewart, ‘Academic Theory’, in *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*, ed. by Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman, and Meg-John Barker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp.53-72 (p. 60-61).

¹³⁵ Stewart, p. 61.

attitudes [...] the stereotype plays a significant role in blame-shifting discourse that can be deployed to justify or excuse violence against transpeople.¹³⁶

Bettcher's reference to appearance and reality is particularly relevant to the depiction of Jumper, whose appearance shifts, and whose reality is discomfiting to those around him. This discomfort is fixed not just around Jumper's inconsistent appearance, but around the relation between this and his identity. There is never a point where Jumper is given a singular, gender that conforms to the demands of the male/female binary; rather, he remains a question: '[w]hat sort of thing is he anyway? Is he man or woman? Or something else altogether, for which we need a new name?'.¹³⁷ In this questioning it is clear that Jumper is expected by the other characters to provide some underlying fact that takes the form of one gender, either male or female; and by constantly changing and shifting and never providing that fact, Jumper refuses this expectation and the presumption that accompanies it, namely that there are only two possible genders and that these conform to cisnormativity. Jumper's own truth, which he gives quite clearly – 'What would you like me to be?'¹³⁸ – is unacceptable to the other characters, and therefore is dismissed. The only possible interpretation following this is that Jumper is deceptive. If the other characters adhere to a strict male/female binary understanding of gender, then Jumper's statement is incomprehensible, and can only be understood as at best confusing and at worst deliberate and even malicious deception. Bettcher's statement that '[r]age at having "been deceived" may play a role in some transphobic hostility' is subtly reflected in the unease that Jumper's refusal to fit into the gender binary generates among the other characters. Jumper's truth is reframed by the other characters as an untruth, as opposed to a truth that does not fit their

¹³⁶ Talia Mae Bettcher, 'Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion', in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. by Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 278-290, p. 280-281.

¹³⁷ Nicholson, p. 3.

¹³⁸ Nicholson, p. 4.

way of understanding. This evokes Sa and the Stranger, deities who are beyond human understanding. The difference is that this concept of non-binary gender as a way of signalling something past human understanding has been applied to a character who has an active role in the narrative. Jumper, unlike Sa and the Stranger, acts and speaks in the text and interacts directly with the other characters, and is therefore a considerably more visible presence than his deity predecessors.

This shifts the depiction of non-binary gender – it is less of an abstract concept now that the character in question is more present in the narrative. However, the potential confrontation is permanently deferred and then never comes. The other characters are challenged by Jumper, but never to the point that his position as strange and uncomfortable is changed into a completely acceptable or unacceptable one. Jumper, with the rest of the Singer people, chooses to be part of the world-changing magic at the end of the book that both resolves the plot and kills them all. As with many of the other examples in this chapter, there is no place in the resolution for an active non-binary character.

This is a more positive approach than the monsters and villains that make up most of the other examples, but it remains a very limited depiction of non-binary gender. Non-binary gender is symbolic, it is not human, and though it is in some way put on a pedestal, that is not the same as the assumed normality granted to other genders. Jumper's appearance shifts, he is difficult to pin down; although his entire presentation is focused on what other individuals need him to be, knowledge of this ability to move between states causes great discomfort in the other characters.

High Priest of Helgrind (Christopher Paolini)

Christopher Paolini's 'Inheritance Cycle' consists of four books published from 2001-2011, and contains the only non-binary character that I have found to be a clear villain in the 2000s. The High Priest of Helgrind appears briefly in two of the four books and is the head of a religion that worships the evil Ra'zac and teaches that physical bodies are unwanted ties to earthly existence, encouraging its followers to remove their own limbs and other body parts as they gain higher ranks. While 'Priest' could be assumed to be a male title, the High Priest is referred to consistently as *it* and described as 'an armless, legless, toothless, seemingly sexless figure'.¹³⁹ Although the High Priest is still undoubtedly human, there is a clear association made between the character's lack of sex and/or gender and the monstrous nature of its beliefs and actions. There is also no real distinction made in the text between gender and anatomy, and unlike the other examples in this category the High Priest never describes its own gender. The High Priest is killed in the fourth book as part of the defeat of evil forces as a whole.

Stryker describes how 'encounters with gender-changing or gender-challenging people can sometimes feel for others like an encounter with a monstrous and frightening unhumanness', and the High Priest being non-binary reflects this fear – as well as its inverse, the monstrous signalling non-binary gender.¹⁴⁰ And not just, in this case, a character who is viewed as monstrous purely due to their deviation from the gender binary. The High Priest is depicted as evil embodied, drinking blood and serving other monsters (the Ra'zac) as well as trying to kill the protagonists. In my chronology, the High Priest is the most clearly monstrous example since the Myrddraal in 1990. The change that has occurred between 1990 and 2008

¹³⁹ Paolini, *Inheritance*, p. 288.

¹⁴⁰ Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, p. 8.

is rooted in ideas about choice. The Myrddraal are monstrous in their lack of humanity, and their choices are not examined in detail. The High Priest is a person who, like the protagonists, made certain choices to arrive at this point. These are physical choices that mirror those of the protagonist: Eragon undergoes a tremendous physical transition as he progresses through his hero's journey, and the High Priest has also altered itself as it has grown in power and rank. These two developments are juxtaposed, with the results of the High Priest's choices being framed as a loss of figurative humanity as well as a loss of gender.

Paolini's 'Inheritance Cycle', much like Jordan's *The Eye of the World*, echoes J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. As in *The Eye of the World*, there is no direct acknowledgement of queerness – and though queerness certainly can be read into Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, it remains subtextual at most, as discussed by Valerie Rohy among others.¹⁴¹ In the 'Inheritance Cycle' there is the non-binary, monstrous High Priest; and also the queer-coding of the main villain, Galbatorix, whose manner towards the male protagonist borders on the seductive:

“Submit,” the king whispered, almost lovingly. “You have nowhere to go, nowhere to hide... This life is at an end for you, Eragon Shadeslayer, but a new one awaits. Submit, and all shall be forgiven.”¹⁴²

The series as a whole does not seem comfortable with characters outside of the cisgender and heterosexual category, drawing on an older tradition of fantasy that often avoided them altogether. The association between the monstrous and the queer is a powerful one, and is far

¹⁴¹ Valerie Rohy, 'On Fairy Stories', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50.4 (2004), 927-948.

¹⁴² Paolini, *Inheritance*, p. 713.

from recent. For example, in Orrin E. Klapp's *American Villain-Types* (1956), a list of possible villains appears – and includes:

10. *Monster*. A bizarre villain whose acts and motivation are beyond the ordinary range of human comprehension and whose stature approaches the demonic. (Fiend, devil, demon, witch, ghoul, ogre, monster, pervert, Jack-the-Ripper, Bluebeard, Nero, psychopath, queer, degenerate, sadist, hell-cat, dope-fiend, hophead, firebug, blood-sucker.)¹⁴³

The full paper includes 'queer' in several different places on the list, all in a similarly pejorative context. Paolini's text is fifty or more years on from Klapp's 'Villain-Types', but nevertheless still draws on a surviving association between the queer and the monstrous in his depiction of the High Priest. Like Jumper, the High Priest can be read as the queer gender equivalent of what Benshoff describes as 'the eruption of some form of queer sexuality into the midst of a resolutely heterosexual milieu'.¹⁴⁴ In the High Priest's case, their non-binary gender is a monstrous disruption of the text's binary, cisgender norm. Unlike Jumper, the High Priest has no real association with deception – its evil is, as discussed, very much written on the body, and is not concealed.

In the 2000s, we have two main examples of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature, and they are very different from each other. Jumper's depiction is reasonably sympathetic – while Bowman and Albard's discomfort with Jumper is not framed as particularly unfair, Jumper is still a representative of goodness in the text. In contrast, the High Priest of Helgrind is a representative of evil and is presented as irredeemable. However, the two characters do share two developments from their predecessors: their position as people who made active choices about their behaviours and presentations, and their relative

¹⁴³ Orrin E. Klapp, 'American Villain-Types', *American Sociological Review*, 21.3 (1956), pp. 337-340 (p. 338) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2089289>>.

¹⁴⁴ Benshoff, p. 226.

obscurity to the reader – we are never given insight into their own understandings of their identities. There are other minor examples of characters who touch on non-binary gender during this period – Mornhavon the Black from Kristen Britain’s ‘Green Rider’ series (1998-present), a bodiless entity whose pronouns move from *it* to *him* as he recalls his former identity as a mortal man,¹⁴⁵ and the demons from Peter V. Brett’s *The Painted Man* (2008), who are largely genderless but occasionally singled out individually and granted a gendered pronoun by other characters when they are considered to be unique.¹⁴⁶ The fantasy genre, during the 2000s, is beginning to incorporate ideas about non-binary gender in a more varied way but nevertheless, not a substantial one. It is tied to ideas about what makes a character human or comprehensible, and while the variety allows for more possibilities than the deities of the 1990s, the non-binary characters of the 2000s are still very restricted.

It is in the next time period that the genre’s depiction of non-binary gender begins to change: 2010-17. This is a shorter time period than the previous ones, which I have defined partially by the natural limitations of the scope of my thesis work, and partially due to the drastic change that takes place in 2017 with the release of Linsey Miller’s ‘Mask of Shadows’ duology. In 2010-17 I have two major examples to examine: George R. R. Martin’s *Sweets*, and Linsey Miller’s *Sal*.

Sweets (George R. R. Martin)

George R. R. Martin’s ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’ series, as described in the previous section on the Stranger, began to be published in 1996 and is still ongoing at the time of writing. *Sweets* is a minor character introduced in the fifth novel of the series (2011) as ‘a willowy creature

¹⁴⁵ Kristen Britain, *First Rider’s Call* (London: Gollancz, 2011).

¹⁴⁶ Peter V. Brett, *The Painted Man* (London: HarperVoyager, 2008).

[...] who dressed in moonstones and Myrish lace' and declares that as to his/her gender, 'I'm both'.¹⁴⁷ A member of Yezzan zo Qaggaz's '*grotesqueri*', Sweets is labelled a *hermaphrodite*, and referred to as *she* by the narration and *he* by the other characters.¹⁴⁸ Sweets only appears in a handful of scenes and the narrative does not give much detail aside from establishing that Sweets is human, possibly intersex, and identifies as both male and female. The latter detail could be debated, as due to the brevity of his/her appearance there is little material from which to draw a conclusion, but the mixed pronouns combined with Sweets' own declaration that 'You are trying to decide if I'm a man or woman, [...] I'm both, and master loves me best' may be considered to indicate a character who is non-binary as well as intersex.¹⁴⁹ Sweets' fate after an outbreak of sickness in their home is unknown at the time of writing.

In contrast with Jumper, a guide figure who takes an active interest in the plot, Sweets is largely irrelevant and indifferent to the events of 'A Song of Ice and Fire' and his/her gender and intersex anatomy appear to be present primarily as part of the aesthetic: a feature of Yezzan zo Qaggaz's collection of unusual beings. Sweets' only brief role in the narrative is as a source of information for one of the major characters, and the first piece of this information is delivered with the description of Sweets' gender: 'I'm both, and master loves me best'.¹⁵⁰ This initial information is followed by advice on surviving life in the *grotesqueri* – 'Make him forget he is dying, even for a little while, and he can be most generous. Deny him nothing'.¹⁵¹ This echoes Jumper's magic: being whoever the other person wants him to be. Sweets' advice is for Tyrion to sublimate his desires into Yezzan zo Qaggaz's, prioritising

¹⁴⁷ Martin, *A Dance With Dragons Part Two: After the Feast*, p. 106.

¹⁴⁸ Martin, *A Dance With Dragons Part Two: After the Feast*, p. 106.

¹⁴⁹ Martin, *A Dance With Dragons Part Two: After the Feast*, p. 106.

¹⁵⁰ Martin, *A Dance With Dragons Part Two: After the Feast*, p. 106.

¹⁵¹ Martin, *A Dance With Dragons Part Two: After the Feast*, p. 107.

the other person. In this case, the context gives the act not the implications of kindness or deception implied by Jumper's transformations but the air of a survival tactic.

Sweets is, in some very specific ways, a step towards greater inclusion of non-binary gender. He/she is a non-magical person, presented as a relatively ordinary human, who just happens to be non-binary, and this is a change from the previous non-binary characters who are either fantastical, evil, or both. However, it is worth investigating the position of Sweets' text, 'A Song of Ice and Fire', in the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre.

Fantasy (particularly Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and texts that follow closely in its footsteps) has often been accused of being escapist, in a way that indicates this as a reason for dismissing its significance. Ursula Le Guin discusses this, saying:

The oldest argument against SF is both the shallowest and the profoundest: the assertion that SF, like all fantasy, is escapist [...] When an insurance broker tells you that SF doesn't deal with the Real World, when a chemistry freshman informs you that Science has disproved Myth, when a censor suppresses a book because it doesn't fit an ideological canon and so forth, that's not criticism; it's bigotry. If it's worth answering, the best answer is given by Tolkien, author, critic and scholar. Yes, he said, fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don't we consider it his duty to escape?¹⁵²

Le Guin is referring to older work by Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories* (1939), which indicates that this argument has continued to be made for some time. Typically, it is specific elements of fantasy – the hero, the clear sense of right and wrong, the good king in power as the solution to all problems – that are dismissed as childish or inadequate for consideration as serious literature. Emerging from this history of dismissal, we find grimdark fantasy.

¹⁵² Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction* (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1989), pp. 178-179.

Grimdark fantasy is usually agreed to have begun in or around 1984 with the publication of Glen Cook's *The Black Company*, which follows a group of mercenaries in a secondary world, pseudo-medieval fantasy as they become involved in a large-scale conflict. The text is irreverent, violent, and missing these supposedly childish elements, while still evoking Tolkien's Middle Earth – albeit from the perspective of the “evil” side. Grimdark is sometimes framed as a reaction to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and it is also easy to see it as a response to the criticisms of fantasy as escapist: it takes a genre often considered unrealistic and focuses on realism. Specifically, it focuses on the realism of violence and cruelty, a clear counter to Tolkien's depiction of kindness and goodness winning out in the end. In 2015, *Publishers Weekly* described the category as ‘an anti-Tolkien style that dwells more on realism, murky morality, and unpleasant consequences’ and added that it had ‘made a serious impact on the market’.¹⁵³

The text in which Sweets exists, ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’, is considered grimdark fantasy. Helen Young argues that series is a rejection of the ‘unrealistic worlds and inauthentic invocations of history’ of earlier fantasy texts, and the series has a clear preoccupation with vivid descriptions of violence of all kinds.¹⁵⁴ The ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’ series’ emphasis on gritty realism also makes a little room for queer characters – and as such, reflects something of how queerness is often framed. Sweets’ presence (and the presence of one or two queer characters in earlier books in the series) is very much a part of the grimdark setting – the association between rejecting the supposedly “childish”, Tolkienesque setting, often accused of being sexless, and embracing anything considered “adult content” or, in other words, not appropriate for children. This rejection is perhaps ironic. While Valerie Rohy

¹⁵³ Michael M. Jones, ‘Of Courts and Conspiracies: For Epic Fantasy, It's Always Darkest before the Somewhat Less Dark’, *The Publishers Weekly* 262.40 (2015), 25-26 (p. 25).

¹⁵⁴ Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (New York: Routledge Companion, 2016), p. 63.

describes how ‘The Lord of the Rings abandons courtship when battle looms, apparently sublimating sexuality to the greater quest’, she also goes on to discuss how numerous later interpretations of Tolkien’s text focus on potential queer readings.¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless, *The Lord of the Rings* does keep sex and sexuality confined largely to the subtext, and this has generated its supposedly sexless and therefore childish reputation.

Queerness has long been held as inappropriate for children; this is often tied to what research into homophobia refers to as ‘the greatest degree of homophobia’ which ‘is related to attributions maintaining that same-sex sexual orientation is learned’, as it is presumed that exposing children to queerness is what makes children queer.¹⁵⁶ This in turn generates the idea that queerness is inherently adult, and this link between queerness and adult content manifests in the way in which Sweets is presented – and the fact that he/she is presented at all – in ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’. Queerness is permitted in this grimdark fantasy specifically because it is a space made for adult content, which means queerness can be represented but also that queerness is then limited to being primarily a method by which to *show* the grittiness or darkness of a text. This in turn can reduce the level of complexity and sophistication in the character’s depiction, which has already achieved its purpose as an indicator of the tone of the novel and is not needed any further.

Throughout this chapter, I have explored seven characters from various pseudo-medieval fantasy texts, all of whom could be considered non-binary. All of these characters are unsympathetic and/or inaccessible (in that their character is not developed much or revealed

¹⁵⁵ Rohy, pp. 927-948.

¹⁵⁶ Dolores Frias-Navarro and Hector Monterde-i-Bort, ‘A Scale on Beliefs about Children's Adjustment in Same-Sex Families: Reliability and Validity’, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 59.9 (2012), 1273-1288 (p. 1276) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2012.720505>>.

in any detail to the reader). In discussing stereotypes and representation, Michael Pickering argues that:

The stereotypical act of descriptive compression and assessment as it is serially reiterated serves to externalize, distance and exclude those so designated. It does so through constructing their ‘difference’ in terms which diverge from what is taken to be central, safe, normal and conventional.¹⁵⁷

This mechanism is very visible in pseudo-medieval fantasy’s depiction of non-binary gender. It is rare to find an example in which a non-binary character is given the depth and development that a cisgender character might be expected to have – indeed, I have located no such examples in pseudo-medieval fantasy before 2017’s *Sal and Tashi*. In the broader fantasy genre there is a little more flexibility – characters such as Marvel Comics’ Loki and Laura Lam’s Micah Grey are given a lot more focus and complexity within their respective texts – but non-binary characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy are positioned as unsympathetic, inaccessible, or outright villainous.

I had not, in my initial research, found any pseudo-medieval fantasy examples that broke this pattern. However, mid-way through my research, in 2017, texts were published that do just that, with perhaps the best example being *Mask of Shadows* by Linsey Miller and its 2018 sequel, *Ruin of Stars*.

Sal (Linsey Miller)

Linsey Miller’s ‘Mask of Shadows’ duology consists of *Mask of Shadows* (2017) and *Ruin of Stars* (2018) and follows Sal as they attempt to win a position as a royal assassin through a series of dangerous tests and then take revenge on those responsible for the death of their

¹⁵⁷ Michael Pickering, *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 48.

family. Sal is described as genderfluid in the blurb of *Mask of Shadows*, and clarifies their gender several times throughout both books: ‘I dress how I like to be addressed – he, she, or they’.¹⁵⁸ Notably, this duology is marketed as young adult, making it the second of the examples listed in this chapter that is not categorised as adult fiction (the first being Nicholson’s *Firesong*, which has been marketed as both children’s fiction and young adult fiction).

This text is a stark contrast to most its predecessors in a number of ways – most noticeably in the fact that the non-binary character is the central, viewpoint character. Sal is the perspective through which the entire story is told, enjoying a nearly unprecedented level of attention for a non-binary character in pseudo-medieval fantasy. This is not just a significant non-binary character such as Jumper or even the High Priest of Helgrind; this narrative is Sal’s narrative, belonging to the non-binary character in a way that has not been seen in pseudo-medieval fantasy before 2017. By centralising the non-binary character, the text grants them the full range of emotional complexity, development, depth, and sophistication that is available to (typically cisgender) main characters, putting Sal on an even footing with characters such as Tolkien’s Frodo and Hobb’s FitzChivalry Farseer. Sal’s focal perspective, moreover, gives a great deal more space for the text to both explore and specify Sal’s non-binary gender – how they understand it, how they present it, and how they navigate a largely cisgender world with it – as well as framing Sal’s understanding of their gender as the reliable one. As I will be discussing in chapter four of this thesis, other texts with cisgender main characters tend to frame the cisgender character’s categorisation of the non-binary character as the most correct – it remains unquestioned and is presented as simple fact.

¹⁵⁸ Linsey Miller, *Mask of Shadows* (Naperville: Sourcebooks Fire, 2017), p. 33.

Sal is specified as genderfluid in the blurb of the first book, as well as in other promotional material such as Miller's website, something not seen in previous pseudo-medieval fantasy texts.¹⁵⁹ This is revealing – evidently, explicit queerness in a book is not now considered inevitably detrimental to a book's marketability, and might even increase sales. The duology is published by Sourcebooks Fire, the young adult division of Sourcebooks, which states that '[w]e are passionate about producing books with authentic teen voices that create and validate the teen experience in all of its diversity'.¹⁶⁰ As discussed in the introduction, the issue of diversity in fiction is one that gained more and more attention in the 2010s, and Sourcebooks Fire is only one example. We Need Diverse Books developed in 2014 as a movement towards increasing the variety of experiences, cultures, and people represented in fiction, and in 2016 established the Walter Dean Myers Award for Outstanding Children's Literature, which is focused on diversity. With acceptance for non-binary gender on the rise, and movements towards diversity in publishing, the 'Mask of Shadows' duology is a demonstration of how these changes have begun to impact pseudo-medieval fantasy fiction as well as the way in which it is marketed.

Turning to the setting of the text, the 'Mask of Shadows' duology presents two countries with two opposing cultural attitudes: one is accepting of queer identities, and one is strictly heteronormative and queerphobic. This is something not depicted in previous examples – the non-binary character in previous examples is always presented as a disruption to the norm, and usually an unwanted one. If the character *is* depicted as wanted, this tends to be framed as being *despite* the atypical and discomfiting nature of their gender (Jumper) or because the character doing the wanting is specifically interested in their atypicality (Sweets) – the

¹⁵⁹ Linsey Miller, *Books* (n. d.), <<http://www.linseymiller.com/books/>> [accessed 14 April 2022].

¹⁶⁰ Sourcebooks, *Homepage* (n. d.), <<https://www.sourcebooks.com/young-adult.html>> [accessed 14 April 2022].

presence of non-binary gender still constitutes a disruption. Sal, however, exists in a fictional society that acknowledges queer people respectfully – including, specifically, transgender people, something that is expanded upon more in the second book, as the text explores the queer community that Sal has found themselves in. This has a tremendous impact on how non-binary gender is presented in the text – firstly, as something that may be acceptable, and secondly, as something that faces opposition.

Non-binary gender as acceptable, ordinary, and human – this is not something seen in pseudo-medieval fantasy before. Sal is not the only queer character in the ‘Mask of Shadows’ duology, and also not the only transgender character. Protagonist though Sal is, they still could have been all alone in this world, especially given that protagonists in fantasy tend to be given unique skills or aspects (the chosen one narrative, in which the protagonist is the only one who can defeat evil and/or bring peace, being the dominant example of this). Eleanor Formby, in her book *Exploring LGBT Spaces and Communities: Contrasting Identities, Belongings and Wellbeing*, discusses ‘how forms of community can offer support, information and/or friendship, which in turn can aid affirmation and identity validation and foster self-confidence and self-esteem’, and this is something that the ‘Mask of Shadows’ duology is able to demonstrate.¹⁶¹ This inclusion has a significant impact on the text’s depiction of non-binary gender. Firstly, it offers a much more expanded demonstration of the queer experience. Sal, unlike their predecessors, is no longer a singular oddity – they are part of a wider community. That wider community, in turn, finds more acceptance in the culture as a whole. Secondly, placing Sal in the context of other queer people makes their non-binary gender just another facet of them, a part of their identity that, like the other parts, they share

¹⁶¹ Eleanor Formby, *Exploring LGBT Spaces and Communities: Contrasting Identities, Belongings and Wellbeing* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 170.

with other people. It allows their non-binary gender to be distinct from their narrative role, unlike in the cases of many previous non-binary characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature. Other queer characters act as Formby describes, able to ‘aid affirmation and identity validation’ both in a way that effects Sal’s character development and in a way that effects Sal’s depiction to the reader.¹⁶²

Creating a fictional environment in which a queer community exists is one part of the novelty of this duology – and the other half of the equation is the framing of the opposition to queerness. In the ‘Mask of Shadows’ duology, people who demonstrate queerphobia are almost always the enemy – Five, who deliberately misgenders Sal, is also one of their greatest threats in the first book, and it is made clear in book two that if the other country wins this fight then Sal and people like them would be forced to conform to binary gender, with any kind of queerness forbidden – ‘Most of us supported Our Queen because we were the ones Erlend wanted dead the most’.¹⁶³ The way in which this pseudo-medieval fantasy text differs from its predecessors, then, is not solely its depiction of an accepting society, but its framing of opposition to queerness as negative. This framing is not confined to villains and antagonists – Sal is occasionally misgendered or has their queerness disrespected by characters who are their friends and allies, and this is treated very clearly as an error that requires an apology:

“Honorable,” I said. We’d a title to keep our hold on male and female onlyness at bay, and it didn’t take any extra effort to use.
“Apologies.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Formby, p. 170.

¹⁶³ Linsey Miller, *Ruin of Stars*, (Naperville: Sourcebooks Fire, 2018), p. 50.

¹⁶⁴ Miller, *Ruin of Stars*, p. 28.

This culture has some language in place for its queer community – in this example, a gender-neutral title, equivalent to *lord* or *lady*, which is *honorable*. Sal notes how easy this is to use; later in the text we are given an example of this exchange that does not include an apology and is instead used to demonstrate cisnormativity (and, more generally, queerphobia) as a negative trait:

“Lady Opal,” she said – I was but I didn’t like the way she said it, like she’d say it no matter what – and smiled. “What a pleasure it is to see you.”
“Honorable Opal.” See how she liked being countered. “I’ve had worse welcomes.” She only just held back her sneer. “A pity you insist.”
“I insist,” I said. “And I don’t care about your opinions on it.”¹⁶⁵

Sal notes that they can tell when the gendered title is only accidentally correct, and in fact the intent of the person concerned is to dismiss their non-binary gender entirely. The barely hidden sneer in response to the correction to *Honorable* confirms Sal’s guess, and is part of the depiction of this character as unpleasant and part of the group of antagonists. By placing the queer-positive culture alongside a queerphobic culture, the text makes more explicit that neither case can be considered the default – it is not that one type of culture is inevitable, it is that cultures are produced in varying ways and with different norms. Additionally, if cultures can vary then cultures can also change – the norms of any given culture are malleable rather than fixed, and the fact that a given culture (fictional or otherwise) is unsupportive of non-binary gender does not necessarily mean that non-binary gender is not supported elsewhere. Indeed, the presentation of the two cultures in the ‘Mask of Shadows’ duology allows room for the idea that a society where non-binary gender is not only accepted (as shown directly in the text) but, potentially, part of the norm. This returns us to Butler’s emphasis on the way in which the queer Other is created by an adherence to a set of norms, as well to the idea that what is Othered and what is normal are not, necessarily, fixed:

¹⁶⁵ Miller, *Ruin of Stars*, p. 189.

[T]he spectres of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish casual or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the “expression” or “effect” of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice.¹⁶⁶

Non-binary gender is typically framed as one of these ‘spectres of discontinuity and incoherence’, and is by Erlend (the queerphobic culture) in this text, but not by the culture to which Sal belongs.¹⁶⁷ The queerphobic culture itself is partially defined by those it excludes, as it must have an Other in order to define its Self. In embracing cisnormativity and heteronormativity, Erlend has quite literally created its own opponents; those who do not conform to those strictures can only exist in conflict with them when they are so heavily enforced. Sal themselves is clearly symbolic of this dynamic: their personal enmity with Erlend is generated initially by believing themselves to be the sole survivor of the genocide of their people, and as they grow older that enmity is developed as they understand that ‘their very existence outside of Erlend’s fragile standards threatened the old Erlend way of life’.¹⁶⁸ The architect of Erlend’s defeat being non-binary is a powerful statement as well as a reflection of the way in which norms around gender and sexuality can be disrupted by queerness.

Non-binary gender is not entirely unremarkable in the ‘Mask of Shadows’ duology, even in the more welcoming culture. But the depiction of distinctive cultures, of different attitudes and approaches to gender, does in and of itself demonstrate the range of possibility available. Sal is not the only example of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy that 2017 has to offer; indeed, from this point onwards there is a comparatively rapid increase in non-binary characters, something I will discuss in more detail later in this thesis. But Sal is an indicator

¹⁶⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 23.

¹⁶⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 23.

¹⁶⁸ Miller, *Ruin of Stars*, p. 13.

of a turning point in the depiction of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy, and so serves as a useful stopping point for this chronology.

Conclusion

It is clear that, over time, the depiction of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy has developed in complexity and sophistication. Primarily, the time period covered in this chapter has seen a shift from non-binary as a theoretical concept to non-binary as an aspect of personhood, and towards the latter end the allowance for non-binary characters to lead narratives rather than be confined to smaller and more limited roles. However, this is obviously not a completely neat, linear progression, in which the monstrous depictions are left behind. Rather, while non-binary characters such as the High Priest of Helgrind continue to appear, characters like Jumper, Sweets, and then Sal emerge alongside them, as the range of non-binary characters increases. It does not seem likely that monstrous, villainous, or otherwise limited depictions of non-binary gender will entirely disappear – the changes so far instead seem to indicate that non-binary characters could increase in number until they eventually include a similar variety in depiction to cisgender characters. These changes are rooted in the impact of queer theory and queer activism, as transgender people gain more rights and greater understanding from society as a whole; and also, from an increased focus on the impact of representation in fiction.

Following my work in this chapter, there are some notable aspects of non-binary depiction in pseudo-medieval fantasy that bear further investigation – the non-human nature of many non-binary characters, the use of the pronoun *it*, and the conflation of gender identity with anatomy.

Chapter Two: Transphobia and Non-Binary Othering

In this chapter I argue that in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature, pronouns, humanisation, and anatomical information are used together in order to Other pre-2017 non-binary characters. This contrasts with depictions of non-binary characters after this time period, who are granted more complexity and not typically Othered.

This chapter concludes part one of this thesis by taking the non-binary characters discussed in chapter one and analysing the specific elements that their depictions have in common. This analysis will allow me to explore the shifting and complex way in which non-binary gender is depicted in pseudo-medieval fantasy in light of Judith Butler's work on gender and cultural intelligibility, as well as incorporating elements of disability studies, Halberstam's work on the treatment of non-binary and transgender people, and Talbot, Atkinson, and Atkinson's work on language and power. I have broken this chapter into four subsections: the impact of gendered pronouns, non-human non-binary characters, the conflation of gender with anatomy, and the ways in which these three concepts work together to depict non-binary gender as Other to a cisgender Self.

Throughout this chapter, there are two concepts that require some clarification. Firstly, it is important to clarify the meaning of *humanising* in fantasy fiction due to the frequent use of non-human characters and the possibilities inherent in a fictional universe. When discussing whether or not a character is human, I will specify that they are *literally* human. I will be using *figuratively* humanised to refer to the way in which a character may be given depth, sympathy, and complexity, regardless of whether they are *literally* human or non-human.

Secondly, it is important to clarify the way in which non-binary gender interacts with binaries, particularly the binary dynamics that I am discussing in this chapter. Non-binary gender refers to a broad swathe of people, with the only common element being that neither *male* nor *female* adequately and entirely describe the person in question's gender. The *non-binary of non-binary gender*, therefore, places said persons outside of the male-female binary dynamic in which any given person must and can only embody one of those two options. Non-binary gender itself, however, can become part of other binary dynamics – typically as reflections of the Self/Other dynamic, in which non-binary gender is often framed as the Other to the cisgender binary-abiding Self. These dynamics typically erase or fail to account for binary transgender people, who are not normally present in the texts I am analysing. In this chapter I will be discussing some of these overlapping and interconnected binaries as they impact the depiction of non-binary gender.

The first aspect of non-binary gender depiction in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature that I will address is the use of pronouns.

The Impact of Gendered Pronouns

In this section I will address the ways in which the pronouns used to refer to a non-binary character impact their depiction; particularly, the involvement of pronoun use in the Othering of non-binary characters. I argue specifically that pronouns are used both to describe a character as Other (particularly in the case of *it*, but also in other pronouns when they misgender or otherwise demean the character in question), and to demonstrate that character's Otherness (as their pronoun is typically enforced upon them by a cisgender character or cisnormative perspective). In order to do this, I will be drawing on queer theory and gender-focused research both literary and linguistic, particularly focusing on the ways in

which language can be used as an exclusionary tool. Exkert and McConnell-Ginet’s work on language and gender is central to this section.¹⁶⁹ Talbot, Atkinson, and Atkinson’s discussion of the way in which acting ‘to define and categorise, to include and exclude’ is an expression of power allows for an exploration of the fundamental way in which pronouns can be used to define and limit an individual character in a narrative.¹⁷⁰ And Butler’s concept of ‘beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined’ is also relevant in that it reflects the impact of pronouns as indicators of cultural intelligibility, particular where I focus on *it* and *they*.¹⁷¹

There are a number of different pronouns in use across the examples that I addressed in chapter one, among them *it*, *he*, *she*, *they*, as well as various combinations of pronouns. As can be seen below in Table 1, arranged alphabetically by author for ease of reference, a varied use of pronouns is overwhelmingly common:

Table 1: Pronoun use across pseudo-medieval fantasy texts (ordered by author)

Author	Character/s	It	He	She	They	Mixed
<i>Brett</i> ¹⁷²	<i>Demons</i>	✓	✓			✓
<i>Britain</i>	<i>Mornhavon the Black</i>	✓	✓			✓
<i>Ember</i>	<i>Tashi</i>		✓		✓	✓
Hobb	Sa	✓	✓	✓		✓
Jordan	Myrddraal	✓	✓			✓
Martin	Stranger	✓	✓			✓
Martin	Sweets		✓	✓		✓
Miller	Sal		✓	✓	✓	✓
Nicholson	Jumper	✓	✓			✓
Paolini	High Priest	✓				

¹⁶⁹ Penelope Exkert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁷⁰ Mary Talbot, Karen Atkinson and David Atkinson, *Language and Power in the Modern World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 2.

¹⁷¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 23.

¹⁷² Italicised characters are those that I did not go into detailed examination of in chapter one, as their inclusion did not add to the chapter one analysis in any meaningful way. They will be addressed, where appropriate, in this chapter.

However, what this table does not account for is the prioritisation of each pronoun and the way in which they are presented in the text – in some texts, each pronoun in use holds equal weight (such as for Martin’s Sweets or Miller’s Sal), whereas in others, one or more pronouns are framed as correct and others are framed as insulting or inappropriate (such as for Ember’s Tashi or Nicholson’s Jumper). It is also relevant to discuss the way in which the characters relate to the pronoun used for them – I argue that framing the pronoun used as the choice of the non-binary character correlates with an overall more complex and legitimising depiction of non-binary gender. In contrast, when the non-binary character is given a pronoun entirely based on the perspective of the cisgender character, the non-binary character is more likely to be simplified and dehumanised, with their gender more likely to be treated as monstrous or invalid.

Through this section I will address each pronoun in turn, as well as taking some time to discuss nouveau pronouns (not seen in pseudo-medieval fantasy in the time period that I am discussing but beginning to be seen in other genres), and mixed or shifting pronoun use. I will focus primarily on the example characters from chapter one, with some discussion of additional characters (italicised in Table 1) where appropriate. The first of the pronouns used to refer to non-binary characters is *it*.

It

There is a small but significant percentage of non-binary and transgender people who use *it* as a pronoun; the annual Gender Census, a semi-formal online census focused around people

who are not cisgender that in 2019 received over eleven thousand responses, lists *it* as the twelfth most commonly chosen pronoun.¹⁷³

However, barring the choice to apply it to oneself, *it* is often considered to be derogatory in the non-binary and transgender community. This is, obviously, hardly a new or revolutionary understanding of *it* – the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, records *it* as being derogatory when in reference to a person as early as 1598 and as recently as 2011.¹⁷⁴ Gender Census also notes that *it* is one of several ‘terms that have been and still are used to alienate and dehumanise’.¹⁷⁵ Despite this, the use of *it* to refer to non-binary characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature remains quite frequent. *It* is used to refer to the non-binary character in seven of the ten examples that I am discussing. There are many ways in which the recurring use of *it* as a pronoun in pseudo-medieval fantasy, due to its derogatory impact, fosters a hostile environment for non-binary characters – an environment which is only reinforced by other common elements of non-binary depiction, such as the way in which many of these characters are non-human and/or monstrous (discussed later in this chapter). Primarily, *it* is used to dehumanise a character who does not fit the predetermined categories of male and female.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler discusses how ‘the very notion of “the person” is called into question by the cultural emergence of those “incoherent” or “discontinuous” gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined’, and this is visible here.¹⁷⁶ However,

¹⁷³ Gender Census, *Gender Census 2019: Worldwide Report* (n. d.) <<https://gendercensus.com/results/2019-worldwide/>> [accessed 14 April 2022].

¹⁷⁴ ‘It’, in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/100246?result=2&rskey=8HTJ5z&>> [accessed 30 March 2016].

¹⁷⁵ Gender Census, *FAQ* (n. d.), <<https://gendercensus.com/faq/#offensive-terms>> [accessed 14 April 2022].

¹⁷⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 23.

Butler frames this as having radical potential – a positive disruption of a restrictive norm. In this use of *it*, the personhood of the characters is called into question and ultimately denied, employing the cultural dynamic that Butler describes in order to create characters who can be quickly defined as Other or less than human. One example of this is Jordan’s Myrddraal, which are non-human villains often in direct opposition to the human protagonists: ‘The Myrddraal seemed to hesitate as the humans appeared atop the hill, but in the next instant it produced a sword with the black blade Ran remembered so queasily, and waved it over its head’.¹⁷⁷ The combination of framing *Myrddraal* in opposition to *humans* with the use of *it* clearly communicates the Otherness of the Myrddraal with little explanation.

The way in which the pronoun *it* is applied varies somewhat in the examples that I have found. In some examples (like Hobb’s Sa, or Nicholson’s Jumper) it appears as an occasional or intermittent insult. In others (Brett’s demons, Britain’s Mornhavon the Black, Jordan’s Myrddraal, Martin’s Stranger, and Paolini’s High Priest), the use of the pronoun *it* is constant or almost constant, and this dehumanising choice is a part of the ways in which the character is figuratively dehumanised, rendered monstrous, and Othered. The portrayal of these characters is fairly straightforward, with the character placed firmly in the category of characters that the reader is not expected to empathise with – these characters are not figuratively humanised. All three of these characters are either neutral parties (Martin’s Stranger) or antagonists or threats of some kind (Jordan’s Myrddraal, Paolini’s High Priest) – none are allies to the protagonist – and only Paolini’s High Priest is literally human.

Not every character who is referred to as *it* is limited to only that pronoun. Characters like Hobb’s Sa and Nicholson’s Jumper are more often referred to as *he* (Jumper) or *he* and *she*

¹⁷⁷ Jordan, p. 266.

(Sa). The use of *it* occurs not as part of the narration or standard way to refer to that character, but instead as an insult, usually from a specific other character. In Hobb's 'Realm of the Elderlings' series, a character from a culture that does not worship Sa refers to Sa as 'Sa, the god that fucks itself', turning Sa's combination of a male and female aspect into an insult.¹⁷⁸ And Albard, the former antagonist-turned-tutor in *Firesong*, thinks '[w]hat a moonface clot it is' in reference to Jumper, among many other insults.¹⁷⁹ This use of *it* is clearly derogatory, and the use of varied or shifting pronouns will be discussed below.

Butler's notion of the disruptive figure who refuses cultural intelligibility is evoked by *it*, but only in a derogatory and dehumanising manner – while the use of *it* could potentially embrace positive, radical potential, in the pseudo-medieval examples discussed it does not. This is the result of the cisnormative perspective holding the power in the text – the power 'to define and categorise, to include and exclude' as described by Talbot, Atkinson, and Atkinson.¹⁸⁰ *It* is always enforced on the non-binary character, and never claimed by them.

He

The pronoun *he* has often been argued to be gender neutral; Susanne Wagner describes this as 'a rather extended period of time in the history of the English language when the choice of a supposedly masculine personal pronoun (*him*) said nothing about the gender or sex of the referent'.¹⁸¹ However, the use of *he* as gender neutral is not that straightforward.

¹⁷⁸ Hobb, *Blood of Dragons*, p. 311.

¹⁷⁹ Nicholson, p. 3.

¹⁸⁰ Talbot, Atkinson and Atkinson, p. 2.

¹⁸¹ Susanne Wagner, 'Gender in English pronouns: Myth and reality' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Albert Ludwigs University of Freiburg, 2003) in FrieDok plus <<https://www.freidok.uni-freiburg.de/fedora/objects/freidok:1412/datastreams/FILE1/content>> [accessed 30 March 2016] p. 41.

Dennis Baron discusses the history of gender neutrality in pronouns in *What's Your Pronoun?* (2020), and dedicates a substantial amount of time to discussing the impact of the insistence that *he* is gender neutral – especially given that this insistence has, historically, varied depending on the circumstances:

The inclusive masculine has even been enshrined in British and American law. Both the UK Act of Interpretation (1850) and the US Dictionary Act (1871) declared that, in the law, words referring to men also include women. But [...] there's no getting around the fact that generic *he* is problematic: sometimes *he* includes both men and women, and sometimes, despite laws that specify that masculine words include women, *he* means “only men.”¹⁸²

Baron is referring to the long history of debates around women's right to vote, in which many people focused on the use of the pronoun *he* in law to argue either that women were automatically included by that *he* and should be permitted to vote, or that they were clearly not included and therefore did not have the right to vote. This extended to suffragists arguing that if the *he* in voting law did not apply to women, then neither did the *he* in other laws, such as those around taxes; Baron concludes that ‘[t]he decades-long debate over the right of women to vote, hold office, and enter certain professions, showed that generic *he* was not generic after all, except when it came to requiring women to pay their tax bill or putting them on death row’.¹⁸³

Despite this, there are still people who profess to use *he* as gender neutral. Although *he* as a neutral pronoun does have historical precedence – the *Oxford English Dictionary* states that it is used both ‘generically, without consideration of gender’ and ‘[i]n anaphoric reference to a singular noun or pronoun of undetermined gender’ – it has been strongly contested.¹⁸⁴ Most

¹⁸² Dennis Baron, *What's Your Pronoun? Beyond He & She* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), p. 40.

¹⁸³ Dennis Baron, *What's Your Pronoun? Beyond He & She* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), p. 77.

¹⁸⁴ ‘He’, in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/84893?rskey=kF4Aac&result=4&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [accessed 30 March 2016].

notably, the use of the normally male pronoun to refer to any and all persons has been argued to have emerged from a fundamentally patriarchal viewpoint in which male is the unmarked generic and female is the marked and specific category. Scott Kiesling, discussing gendered language, explains this dynamic as follows: ‘men are invisible and dominant all at once, and their dominance relies in part on that invisibility: they are dominant not only because they are presumed to be always coercive, but because they are the default human category in language, in society, and even in most studies of language and gender’.¹⁸⁵ In contrast, women and femininity must be specified in order to be included. By using only the male pronoun as the generic, one implies, however inadvertently, that male people are the only people relevant to the discussion. Ursula K. le Guin, who initially used *he* as the generic to refer to the non-binary characters populating an entire planet in her 1969 science fiction novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, later criticised her own choice of ‘the so-called generic pronoun he/him/his, which does in fact exclude women from discourse’.¹⁸⁶ Le Guin also pointed out that the assumption that ‘we’re all men [...] turns up in fiction in endless ways’, one of which is ‘in pretending the pronoun *he* includes both genders’.¹⁸⁷

A consequence of the use of the supposedly neutral *he* can be seen in a non-binary character whose primary pronoun it is: Nicholson’s Jumper. Jumper, as discussed above, is occasionally and derogatively referred to as *it*, but for the majority of the time the pronoun used both by the narration and other characters is *he*, regardless of Jumper’s presentation at the time. Jumper is clearly depicted as non-binary in many ways, however this constant use of the pronoun *he* serves to undermine this depiction and render it less certain. As part of a narrative voice that has no obvious character, the use of *he* therefore evokes the idea of

¹⁸⁵ Kiesling, p. 655.

¹⁸⁶ Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dreams Must Explain Themselves* (London: Gollancz, 2018), p. 43.

¹⁸⁷ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Wave in the Mind* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2004), p. 242.

Jumper's non-binary gender not being his ultimate truth but rather a queer covering over a male person. As discussed in chapter one, Jumper's depiction is tied into ideas of deception and transphobia, and even descriptions of him by the protagonists can be very negative: 'This little creature's voice slithered, so that one moment he sounded like a boy, the next like a girl'.¹⁸⁸ In this way, the use of *he* serves not as neutral as much as it serves to evoke ideas about deception and emphasise that there might be some discoverable truth hidden beneath Jumper's presentation.

She

The pronoun *she* is generally considered to refer only to specifically female characters, though some texts have experimented with this. One example is the science fiction novel *Ancillary Justice* by Ann Leckie, in which *she* is used as the default pronoun for all characters – because the viewpoint character's first language 'doesn't mark gender in any way'.¹⁸⁹ This expansive use of *she* is not attempted in any of the pseudo-medieval fantasy that I have investigated; Baron's pronoun history notes that while it is '[s]ometimes found in twentieth-century feminist writing as an antidote to the generic *he*, generic *she* proved too political for the average speaker or writer'.¹⁹⁰ It is uncertain as to whether *too political* is the reason or not, or indeed what precisely that means – Baron does not go into detail – but regardless, *she* is not a common choice for gender neutrality. This is connected to the way in which we mark the masculine and the feminine, as Kiesling describes:

The interesting thing about men (and in the USA, especially heterosexual, Christian, middle-aged, middle-class, white men) is that they are the norm against which other identities are measured [...] Studies of non-middle-class non-white identities have also often assumed that men's identities are the 'default' identities.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Nicholson, p. 206.

¹⁸⁹ Ann Leckie, *Ancillary Justice* (London: Orbit, 2013), p. 3.

¹⁹⁰ Dennis Baron, *What's Your Pronoun? Beyond He & She* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), p. 28.

¹⁹¹ Kiesling, p. 654.

If female identities are not the default, but the specific, then it follows that *she* does not encompass all genders in the way *he* might be argued to. While some works, like Leckie's, do explore this as an option, it is not widely used. The only context in which I have found a non-binary character using *she* as a pronoun is when it is one of several possible pronouns that said character shifts between.

Shifting Pronouns

There are two main ways in which shifting pronouns are used for non-binary characters. Firstly, as a demonstration of the speaker's opinion of the non-binary character – typically misgendering (Sal, Tashi), insults (Sa), or denial of humanity (Brett's demons and Britain's Mornhavon the Black, introduced below). And secondly, as a way of indicating non-binary gender as not necessarily limited to one pronoun (Sal, Sweets, Sa).

While straightforward examples like those discussed above (Myrddraal, Stranger, and the High Priest) do emphasise the dehumanising impact of *it* as a pronoun, depictions of transitional dynamics are also very revealing. In many texts, a shift in pronoun choice is used to demonstrate a change in the speaker's perspective. Notably, this can be seen in characters whose humanity – literal or figurative – is either in question or in flux. Two examples are from texts I have not yet addressed in this thesis: the demons from Peter V. Brett's *The Painted Man*, and Mornhavon the Black from Kristen Britain's 'Green Rider' series.

Peter V. Brett's *The Painted Man* was published in 2008 as the first in the five-volume 'Demon Cycle', completed in 2017. Brett's demons, the primary threats in the first book, are referred to as genderless. However, their depiction demonstrates that members of a

supposedly genderless species can be granted a gender of sorts when one individual is rendered distinct from the others. Brett's demons are both literally and figuratively inhuman, and are mostly referred to using the pronoun *it*: '[w]atched it take a swipe at you'.¹⁹² In contrast, however, the demon referred to as One Arm is singled out from the massed hordes of demons and granted the pronoun *he* based upon his distinction as an individual (due to the loss of an arm and subsequent stalking of the protagonist):

Gaims and Woron were used to this scene, having witnessed it every night for the past year. They had even begun to look forward to it, passing the time on their watch by betting on how long 'One Arm' took to circle the city, or whether he would head east or west to do so.¹⁹³

This shows us an individual being granted a less dehumanising pronoun than the one with which they were originally labelled. This demon is referred to as *he* in both the narration (if it is third person limited, focusing on the perspective of characters like Gaims and Woron) and their dialogue: 'What do you s'pose he wants?'.¹⁹⁴ This shift demonstrates how pronoun use can reveal the unfixed and even transitional aspect of figurative humanisation. In presenting the use of *it* shifting to the use of a non-derogatory pronoun such as *he* or *she*, or vice versa, the text exposes that the presentation of any given character is malleable and subject to change – and that the power is typically in the hands of the narration or speaking character rather than the non-binary character. As with the Myrddraal, the non-binary gender of Brett's demons is never examined in the text; merely used as an indicator of the demons' lack of both figurative and literal humanity. The gendered pronoun *he* is granted by the interest of the (cisgender) human characters, and as such can be withdrawn at any time should One Arm cease to hold their interest. The framing of a gendered, humanising pronoun as something entirely out of the control of the non-binary character is indicative of a pattern in the

¹⁹² Brett, p. 16.

¹⁹³ Brett, p. 214.

¹⁹⁴ Brett, p. 213.

depiction of non-binary gender: firstly that non-binary gender is non-human, which I will discuss later in this chapter, and secondly that pronoun shifts can indicate the level of respect or empathy that other characters or the narration are willing to grant the non-binary character.

Character pronouns shifting as an indicator of humanity (figurative or literal) can also be seen in a different light in Britain's *Mornhavon the Black*. Kristen Britain's 'Green Rider' series began in 1998 and consists of seven novels and a collection of short stories at the time of writing. Britain uses the same two-pronoun shift that Brett does (between *it* and *he*), but in a slightly different way. As the primary antagonist of the series, *Mornhavon the Black* is a formerly human man who made himself immortal, and has been reduced to a bodiless sentience existing in the Blackveil Forest by the time the events of the books take place. Throughout his appearances in the second book of the series (*First Rider's Call*, published in 2003), *Mornhavon* is beginning to recall his identity and former literal humanity after centuries of limited, bodiless existence. As he does so the narration shifts between using *it* and using *he* to describe him, with the former being absolutely connected to his current literally non-human state: 'Not only that, it – *he* – had been a leader among men'.¹⁹⁵ His present lack of gender is fundamentally tied to his lack of a human form, despite there not being another species for him to belong to – he is the only being of his kind. The fact that *Mornhavon's* grasping for his memories and his former identity is shown partly by the shift from *it* to *he* shows that non-binary gender is not something framed as typically human in this text – *it* is reflecting a lack of personhood and literal humanity, and both are then evoked by the return of (specific, conventional) gender. This dynamic also indicates a strong connection between gender and the body, which I will go into in further detail later in this chapter. Other

¹⁹⁵ Britain, p. 301.

characters in the text refer to Mornhavon as *he*; *it* only appears in the narration of Mornhavon's gradual awakening in the forest.

By demonstrating that gendered and ungendered pronouns are not fixed but are granted or withdrawn based upon how the character in question and/or their behaviour is perceived, the depictions of both the demons and Mornhavon show the correlation that is both perceived and enforced between figurative humanity and gender. Pronouns in these examples are based upon the perceptions of other characters, which in turn are filtered through those characters' cultural norms. However, they are also used as a tool to delegitimize or legitimise particular individuals in response to their behaviour. Talbot, Atkinson, and Atkinson's argument that '[p]ower is deployed by those who are in a position to define and categorise, to include and exclude' is particularly visible here.¹⁹⁶ In almost every pre-2017 example, the cisgender characters and the narrative voice define and categorise the non-binary characters without their input, and use pronouns to include and exclude.

In contrast to the conflation of gender with anatomy (discussed later in this chapter), the change of pronouns in many of these examples is not prompted by a change in the character's anatomy or even gender presentation, but by a shift in perception. In the case of Brett's demons and Hobb's Sa, the shift is due to a change in external perceptions that are entirely outside the control of the characters. This demonstrates a concept of gender that is dependent not only on external validation but also on external judgement and control, whether benevolent or not, in striking contrast to concepts of self-identification and external acceptance that predominate in non-binary and transgender communities.

¹⁹⁶ Talbot, Atkinson and Atkinson, p. 2.

Mornhavon the Black is an unusual exception to this pattern. In Mornhavon the Black's case the pronoun shift is a reflection of its/his internal perception. The narrative voice in the 'Green Rider' series is free indirect discourse, and in these scenes Mornhavon is the focalizer – the narration may not be first person, but it is giving the reader Mornhavon's perspective, rather than a neutral perspective or the perspective of another character. Mornhavon is the source of his own pronouns. In a different context, this could be the route to empathising with the character or granting legitimacy to non-binary gender, but this is not a possibility that is pursued in the text. Instead, the shift from *it* to *he* has the effect of distancing Mornhavon from his bodiless form and connecting him to his former identity – the shift acts as a revelation of his male gender, rather than an expression of non-binary gender. Where Mornhavon can initially be identified as non-binary and is worth discussing here, his character is resolved through his pronouns and moved into a more cisnormative space.

The depiction of changeability towards non-binary gender demonstrates some of the ways in which non-binary gender is dismissed or erased; by granting or withdrawing what might be referred to as non-derogatory pronoun status based on external judgements, non-binary gender is relegated to merely an insult and dismissed as a meaningful identity. It also emphasises the impact of whose perspective is prioritised and which character has the power. In almost all of the pre-2017 examples, the labelling of non-binary characters is done by cisgender characters who are the focalizers for the narrative and whose perspectives are prioritised. The Myrddraal, the Stranger, Sa, Jumper, the High Priest of Helgrind, Sweets – none of these characters are granted the power to indicate their own pronouns, though Sweets does get to declare 'I'm both' of his/her sex and/or gender when introducing his/herself.¹⁹⁷ Mornhavon the Black's shifting pronouns occur within its/his own internal dialogue;

¹⁹⁷ Martin, *A Dance With Dragons Part Two: After the Feast*, p. 106.

however, they are never expressed to other characters, who refer to it/him as *he* without any input from it/him – their perspectives are still prioritised over that of the non-binary character. Additionally, while many of these characters are powerful – the Myrddraal, the Stranger, Sa, Jumper, the High Priest, Mornhavon the Black, Brett’s demons – they are typically either villains (the Myrddraal, the High Priest, Mornhavon, Brett’s demons) or characters who have no direct impact on the narrative (the Stranger, Sa). The remaining example is Jumper, who has powerful magic and is a guide for the protagonists – but his power is rarely seen, and even more rarely used in a way that allows him to overrule any of the other characters. The power to decide how a non-binary character is referred to is almost always in the hands of the cisgender characters, or the narrative as focalized through one of the cisgender characters, and most of the non-binary characters in question are not framed as sympathetic or experts on their own identity.

The second type of shifting pronouns is the kind that is used to indicate that non-binary gender as not necessarily limited to one pronoun – we see this in two pre-2017 examples (Sweets and Sa) and of course, 2017’s Sal. Exkert and McConnell-Ginet, writing about gender and language, point out that ‘choosing *he* or *she* inevitably imports gender assumptions’; neither of these pronouns alone are ideal for describing a non-binary character.¹⁹⁸ Where they are used in a respectful way, it tends to be in combination.

Miller’s Sal uses a mix of pronouns which change primarily based on the character’s presentation. Martin’s Sweets is referred to as *he* by other characters and *she* by the narration; Hobb’s Sa is referred to, for the most part, as *she* by female worshippers and *he* by male worshippers. All three of these characters use combinations of pronouns, but in each case a

¹⁹⁸ Exkert and McConnell-Ginet, p. 205.

different effect is created. In chapter one I discussed the idea of Sa, as a deity, being beyond full human understanding, and part of this is developed through the use of multiple pronouns – Sa cannot be described using just one. Individual characters chose which one to use (typically reflecting their own gender) in reference to Sa, but both *he* and *she* are correct.

Sweets and Sal, however, *are* human, and so their uses of multiple pronouns are quite different. The way the uses of *he* and *she* are split for Sweets is particularly interesting – instead of referring to Sweets by the speaking character’s preference, as Sa is, the split is between narration and speech. The narration uses *she*, and the speech of other characters uses *he*. In certain types of narration, the narrative voice might have different information to the speaking characters. However in this case, the narration in question takes the form of free indirect speech: the narration is from Tyrion’s perspective, who is also one of the speaking characters, and does not typically give the reader any information that Tyrion does not have. Therefore the use of multiple pronouns reads not as the narration correcting the character but simply as the character using both pronouns. The pronoun use is a very literal and direct response to Sweets’ declaration of being ‘both’ – both male and female, therefore both *he* and *she*.¹⁹⁹

Sal’s use of multiple pronouns is different again, particularly in that Sal is the only one of these three characters to specifically indicate their own pronouns: ‘I dress how I like to be addressed – he, she, or they’.²⁰⁰ Sal’s pronouns shift in concordance with their genderfluidity, and Sal uses clothing to indicate the appropriate pronoun to other characters. The shifting pronouns are framed as simple, accurate ways of referring to Sal, and whether or not another

¹⁹⁹ Martin, *A Dance With Dragons Part Two: After the Feast*, p. 106.

²⁰⁰ Miller, *Mask of Shadows*, p. 33.

character uses them appropriately (as opposed to misgendering Sal, either deliberately or accidentally) is used to demonstrate aspects of that character, something that I will discuss in more detail below.

The two types of shifting pronoun used for non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy are very different. In the first, the shift of pronoun is primarily in the hands of cisgender characters, used as a way to demonstrate the ability of those characters to decide whether or not the non-binary character is entitled to be gendered correctly, treated respectfully, or even considered fully human. In the second, the shift in pronoun can be specified by the non-binary person (as in the example of Sal), though not always (Sa gives no pronoun preferences of his/her own, and while Sweets refers to his/herself as ‘both’ he/she does not specify pronouns explicitly), and it is used to indicate that one pronoun is not enough to accurately indicate that character’s gender. Some characters, such as Sa and Sal, have both types of shifting pronoun applied; but it is only Sal, the most recent example, who is shown to express their own preference for shifting pronouns and to (largely) have that respected by other characters.

Nouveau Pronouns

Nouveau pronouns refer to English pronouns other than *he*, *she*, *it*, or *they*, often developed to fill a believed gap in the language. Baron’s research indicates that attempts to coin new pronouns are not new – they go back to at least the eighteenth century, and over the years ‘[m]ore than 200 of these pronouns were invented, most of them before the 1970s, and many of them before 1900 [...] Two gender-neutral pronouns, *thon* and *heer*, even made it into major dictionaries, though they were later dropped for lack of use’.²⁰¹ Baron emphasises that

²⁰¹ Dennis Baron, *What’s Your Pronoun? Beyond He & She* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), p. 8.

most of these pronouns were developed in response to the idea that the singular *they* was not grammatically correct, and *he* and *she* were too gendered to be neutral.

Nouveau pronouns do appear to be gaining traction in the non-binary community. For example, Exkert and McGonnell-Ginet state that:

One fairly popular set of pronouns in recent years is *ze* (*ze* is here), *zir* (we see *zir*), *zirs* (is that *zir* coat?), *zirs* (is that *zirs*?) and *zirsself* (Chris has learned to get dressed by *zirsself*); another just uses *E/e* or *Ey/ey* for the nominative, *em*, *eir*, *eirs*, and *eirsself* for the rest.²⁰²

This type of pronoun is beginning to appear in fiction – for example, in Becky Chambers’ science fiction ‘Wayfarers’ series, *xe* and *xyr* are pronouns used ‘for people who weren’t girls or boys, and also what you said if you didn’t know which they were’.²⁰³ However, I have not found any examples of them being used in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature.

They

The existing, long-established pronoun remaining is, of course, the ungendered *they*. The grammatical correctness of *they* as a gender-neutral singular pronoun is currently being passionately debated, despite its common use.²⁰⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* does offer a definition as being, echoing its definition of *he*, ‘[i]n anaphoric reference to a singular noun or pronoun of undetermined gender’ but goes on to state that ‘[t]his use has sometimes been considered erroneous’.²⁰⁵ In pseudo-medieval fantasy literature, *they* is occasionally used, but

²⁰² Exkert and McConnell-Ginet, p. 217.

²⁰³ Becky Chambers, *A Closed and Common Orbit* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017), p. 172.

²⁰⁴ Davey Shlasko, ‘How Using “They” as a Singular Pronoun Can Change the World’, *Feministing.com*, 2 March 2015. <<http://feministing.com/2015/02/03/how-using-they-as-a-singular-pronoun-can-change-the-world/>> [accessed 30 March 2016].

²⁰⁵ ‘They’, in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/84893?rskey=kF4Aac&result=4&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [accessed 28 February 2019].

not typically for non-binary gender. Before 2017, *they* is not used to refer to any of the examples I am discussing, but can sometimes be used to refer to a singular person of unknown gender until the point that their gender is revealed. Bradley, Schmid and Lombardo's study on attitudes to gender neutral pronouns found that perceptions of how grammatical *they* changed if it was applied to a specific individual rather than a hypothetical person:

The most grammatical gender-neutral phrasing (in the sense of including both men and women) was the use of 'he or she/him or her' to refer to a generic individual. This was rated as more grammatical than singular 'they/them', which is 'more' gender-neutral than 'he or she/him or her' in the sense that it does not entail a gender binary, and thus encompasses individuals who are neither male nor female. It is notable that singular 'they/them' was rated as highly grammatical when it referred to a generic or hypothetical referent – as grammatical as using 'he/him' or 'she/her' to refer to a hypothetical person. Singular 'they/them' used as a reference for a specific person was considered significantly less grammatical than the generic usage, especially when the referent's name strongly suggests a binary gender.²⁰⁶

This usage is more accommodating to the idea that any unknown person might as likely be non-binary as a woman or a man, allowing a range of possibilities in contrast to the strict labelling of *he* or *she*. However, this technique can also emphasise the importance of knowing a person's gender as well as relying on an underlying implication that *they* is only a placeholder, with the only legitimate genders female (*she*) and male (*he*). A non-binary character is not going to be identified as either male or female – unlike the character of initially unknown gender, the presumed mystery will not resolve into cisgender categorisation. Eris Young describes *genderqueer* as a term that 'expresses this transgression within the specific context of gender; it stands in opposition to the conventions of gender itself and the rigid categories into which we've divided it'.²⁰⁷ Non-binary gender is a

²⁰⁶ Evan D. Bradley, Maxwell Schmid, and Hannah Lombardo, 'Personality, Prescriptivism, and Pronouns: Factors Influencing Grammaticality Judgments of Gender-Neutral Language', *English Today*, 35.4 (2019), 41-52 (p. 50) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0266078419000063>>.

²⁰⁷ Eris Young, p. 33.

disruptive concept – there is, in this example, no resolution into male or female, because their gender is not merely unknown. It is a queer gender. However, the use of *they* for characters or people of initially unknown gender is sometimes leveraged as part of the argument for more acceptance of the use of *they* for non-binary people.²⁰⁸ Baron, for example, points out that *they* is ‘used as well by people who theoretically oppose singular *they* on grammatical grounds – or even constitutional ones – but who use it when they’re not paying attention, just because singular *they* has been good, idiomatic English for seven hundred years’.²⁰⁹

Linsey Miller’s depiction of Sal in *Mask of Shadows* and Julia Ember’s depiction of Tashi in *The Tiger’s Watch*, both published in 2017, make use of the pronoun *they*. Sal, as discussed above, has *they* as one of three possibilities: ‘I dress how I like to be addressed – he, she, or they’.²¹⁰ In contrast, Ember’s Tashi uses *they* as their only correct pronoun.

Julia Ember’s *The Tiger’s Watch* is the first book in the ‘Ashes of Gold’ series. It follows Tashi, a young person with magical abilities on the run from those who invaded their city. Only six pages of the story pass before Tashi confirms that they are non-binary: ‘my gender wasn’t set, binary [...] Some days I felt more masculine and others more feminine’.²¹¹ The matter is raised multiple times but does not dominate either the narrative or Tashi’s character development.

While the text does indicate that Tashi was assigned male at birth (they mention it taking ‘time, pain, and Pharo’s hulking glare to convince some of the other students to stop calling

²⁰⁸ Thesaurus.Com, ‘Its’s OK To Use “They” To Describe One Person: Here’s Why’ (2020), <<https://www.thesaurus.com/e/grammar/they-is-a-singular-pronoun/>> [accessed 15 April 2022].

²⁰⁹ Dennis Baron, *What’s Your Pronoun? Beyond He & She* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), p. 147.

²¹⁰ Miller, *Mask of Shadows*, p. 33.

²¹¹ Julia Ember, *The Tiger’s Watch* (Tallahassee: Harmony Ink Press, 2017), p. 6.

me a boy’), that is not a focus of their story.²¹² Their non-binary gender (likely genderfluid) is treated as a simple fact and the assumptions of others as errors. Even Xian, initially a villain, accepts the correction of pronouns and in turn corrects another character later in the text: ““They,” Xian said with pointed emphasis, “don’t understand our language.””²¹³ The use of *they* is not interrogated in detail in the text, only presented as the correct pronoun for Tashi – this resembles the way that *they* is presented in Miller’s ‘Mask of Shadows’ duology as simply an accurate pronoun. However, in the ‘Mask of Shadows’ duology, *they* is not the only accurate pronoun – as discussed in the shifting pronouns section above, Sal uses *he*, *she*, and *they*, moving between them to best reflect their genderfluidity. All three options are presented as having equal validity as pronouns. This depiction – of *they* as a legitimate option, either as a sole pronoun or one of several – is quite significant, standing as it does in contrast to the arguments that gender-neutral pronouns, *they* included, are largely incorrect.

This is a drastic shift in the representation of non-binary characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature – by referring to a non-binary character as *they* rather than what Exkert and McConnell-Ginet describe as the ‘profoundly dehumanizing’ *it*, there is more potential for that characters to be treated as equally human alongside the cisgender characters.²¹⁴ Prior to 2017, research suggested that as the debate around *they* continues to develop, it was quite possible that it would gain greater legitimacy. The emergence of these 2017 examples would support this, and it is worth noting that they come in the wake of other acknowledgements of this use of the pronoun such as the singular *they* being named word of the year in 2015 by the American Dialect Society.²¹⁵

²¹² Ember, p. 6.

²¹³ Ember, p. 50.

²¹⁴ Exkert and McConnell-Ginet, p. 171.

²¹⁵ American Dialect Society, *2015 Word of the Year is singular “they”* (2016), <<http://www.americandialect.org/2015-word-of-the-year-is-singular-they>> [accessed 30 March 2016].

Shifts in Pronoun Use and Overall Impact

In Bradley, Schmid and Lombardo’s study on attitudes to gender neutral pronouns, one of their conclusions had to do with the connection between gender neutral and non-binary language and attitudes to gender roles:

‘Those who advocate greater use of gender-neutral and non-binary language should note that resistance to personal pronouns other than ‘he/him’ and ‘she/her’ appear to be driven not simply by grammatical prescriptivism, but also by more conservative and binary gender role attitudes. Given the divergence between generic and specific use of singular ‘they’, greater acceptance of such language is not driven just by a greater willingness to ignore grammatical conventions.’²¹⁶

The importance of a simple choice of pronoun and the ways in which it is used to form the depiction of a character clearly demonstrates the gender norms and related social pressures that such texts reinforce, regardless of whether or not the character concerned is figuratively humanised. The use of pronouns to Other a character, particularly seen in the use of *it*, persists through the 1990-2017 time frame, though some changes are visible – as we can see by returning to the table seen at the start of this section, now arranged chronologically as

Table 2:

Table 2: Pronoun use across pseudo-medieval fantasy texts (chronological)

Author	Character/s	It	He	She	They	Mixed
Jordan	Myrddraal	✓	✓			✓
Martin	Stranger	✓	✓			✓
Hobb	Sa	✓	✓	✓		✓
Nicholson	Jumper	✓	✓			✓
<i>Britain</i>	<i>Mornhavon the Black</i>	✓	✓			✓
<i>Brett</i>	<i>Demons</i>	✓	✓			✓
Paolini	High Priest	✓				
Martin	Sweets		✓	✓		✓
<i>Ember</i>	<i>Tashi</i>		✓		✓	✓
Miller	Sal		✓	✓	✓	✓

²¹⁶ Bradley, Schmid and Lombardo, p. 52.

It is in common use in many of these examples as dehumanising, contributing to the association between non-binary characters and the uncanny as well as to the Othering of non-binary gender. And there is not enough data available to state absolutely that the use of *it* has entirely stopped – indeed, the most recent example of the use of *it* is also the only example in which *it* is the character’s sole pronoun (Paolini’s High Priest). However, it is clear that more recent texts are including the use of the singular *they*, uses of pronoun combinations such as he and she (Martin’s Sweets), or shifting pronouns at the non-binary character’s request (Miller’s Sal). It is possible that we are seeing a shift in the genre to less dehumanising pronoun use, and one that mirrors the shift discussed in chapter one towards more prominent non-binary characters.

This shift is also reflected by a change in the source of the pronouns – where for the pre-2017 characters their pronouns are given by a cisgender character or the cisnormative narrative voice, the examples from 2017 and later (Miller’s Sal and Ember’s Tashi) have the non-binary character select and express what pronouns are appropriate. This moves their depiction distinctly away from the Otherness of their predecessors, using self-identification as a way of demonstrating both their queerness and their autonomy. This choice can be independent of which pronoun is used – when discussing a *New York Times* article which refused to refer to a genderqueer-identified teenager by their preferred pronouns (*they*, *it*, or *xe*), S. Bear Bergman referred to this as ‘linguistic violence’.²¹⁷ The Talbot, Atkinson, and Atkinson description of the way that power belongs to those who define is immensely important to the

²¹⁷ Bergman, p. 40.

use of pronouns, and any analysis of the language used around non-binary gender must account for the source of that language.

The impact of cisgender/cisnormative perspective is something that I will discuss in more depth in chapter four. There are several other aspects of non-binary Othering in pseudo-medieval fantasy to address first, however – and the next to discuss is the number non-binary characters that are non-human.

Non-Binary, Non-Human

The association between non-binary and non-human is a persistent one. The presence of any non-binary character, human or otherwise, draws attention to the concept and its possibilities; however, in the case of many non-binary characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy, non-binary gender can be associated so strongly with a lack of literal humanity that it frames the concept of human non-binary gender as less believable. Susan Stryker, discussing gender-neutral pronouns in *Transgender History*, states that *it* is ‘not considered appropriate for reference to humans precisely because it doesn’t indicate a gender’.²¹⁸ The long-running use of depicting an absence of gender in correlation to an absence of literal humanity is the focus of this subsection, and I will be discussing the way in which this contributes to the Othering of non-binary characters.

In terms of the literal humanity or lack thereof in the examples discussed, four of the ten are non-human – five, if we consider that Mornhavon the Black’s non-binary gender vanishes when he recognises himself as human. Jumper’s non-binary gender, which is tied fundamentally to his ever-shifting appearance, is arguably not part of his humanity but part of

²¹⁸ Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, p. 22.

his magic. We are left with four human characters whose non-binary gender is indisputably human: Sal and Tashi, the most recent examples; Sweets; and the High Priest of Helgrind. In both pre-2017 cases (Sweets and the High Priest) their gender is tied to their anatomy, and specifically considered part of what makes them peculiar (Sweets) or monstrous (the High Priest). In this section, I will discuss the strong associations in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature between humanity (both literal and figurative) and gender – and the corresponding association between non-binary gender and a lack of humanity.

Basis in Literary Theory: Sex, Gender, and Humanity

A significant point of the feminist perspective on the gendered Other is that the oppression of women and the Othering of women are fundamentally connected, and that both the oppression and the Othering are acts primarily committed by men on women. This was perhaps argued most famously by Simone de Beauvoir in her 1949 work, *The Second Sex*. Monique Wittig stated in 1980 that ‘the concept of difference between the sexes ontologically constitutes women into different/others’ – and it remains an important concept.²¹⁹ This dynamic is described by Hélène Cixous as ‘dual, *hierarchized* oppositions. Superior/Inferior’ (emphasis in original).²²⁰ These theorists are specifically discussing the male/female dynamic of binary gender, and their work does not account for non-binary gender. However, while Molly Hite notes that ‘these issues of a gendered otherness and of how this otherness is construed by the surrounding culture are repeatedly raised within women’s experimental writings in the twentieth century’, this work on the gendered Other can nevertheless inform aspects of queer theory and transgender studies, which often involve discussions of

²¹⁹ Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p.29.

²²⁰ Hélène Cixous, ‘Sorties’, in *New French Feminisms*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (London: The Harvester Press Limited, 1981), pp. 90-98 (p. 91).

hierarchized gender dynamics.²²¹ The gendered Other has frequently been analysed from the perspective of feminist theory, with femininity the Other to the masculine Self; but non-binary gender is also a form of gendered Other, framed specifically as the Other to the cisnormative Self. For example, Judith Butler addresses the binary dynamic and its overlaps with understandings of sexuality in *Gender Trouble*:

The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire.²²²

The hierarchical structure of gender dynamics is a part of the cisnormative binary – but when gender non-conformity of any kind is introduced, it is often forced into an Othered position that frames cisnormative binary genders as ordinary and positive by contrast. Halberstam points out that this is often even produced by denying attributes that both sides of this presumed binary share:

Eccentric, double, duplicitous, deceptive, odd, self-hating: all of these judgements swirl around the passing woman, the cross-dresser, the nonoperative transsexual, the self-defined transgender person, as if other lives – gender-normative lives – were not odd, not duplicitous, not doubled and contradictory at every turn.²²³

Most of my examples come from texts depicting cisnormative, heteronormative, and (to lesser or greater degrees) patriarchal cultures, a common feature of pseudo-medieval fantasy literature. Peter Melville, discussing Robin Hobb's work, notes that 'heterosexual norms are so dominant in epic fantasy worlds that expressions of alternative sexualities often remain unintelligible or wholly absent', and this also applies to genders that do not fit the

²²¹ Molly Hite, *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narratives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 8.

²²² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 31.

²²³ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, p. 57-58.

cisnormative binary system.²²⁴ As I began to discuss in chapter one of this thesis, many of the pre-2017 examples that I am analysing do not allow any space for the acknowledgement of non-binary gender aside from as the monstrous or mysterious Other. The examples that I refer to in this thesis, particularly those which are referred to in their respective texts as *it*, are often Othered in multiple ways – placing the non-binary/transgender Other in opposition to the cisgender Self. For example, the cisgender narrative viewpoint can identify and label the non-binary character/s in a distinctly negative and often dehumanising manner due to their lack of cisnormativity, with little or nothing of the text framing this behaviour as incorrect or harmful. The dehumanisation of non-binary characters is both figurative and literal, and is demonstrated in many forms.

In his work on transgender studies, Stephen Whittle states that '[h]aving a sex is apparently [...] a prior determinant of being human', but here we have several examples of characters who are still human (familiar) yet lacking in something believed to be fundamental to humanity (sex and/or gender).²²⁵ Whittle is not arguing that non-humans cannot have a sex, but that humans cannot *not* have a sex and remain human – at least in the context of cisnormativity, and of course in that context there are only two options for sex and they align with two genders in prescribed ways. Therefore, this concept that having a sex is required for humanity also frames gender as required – and this required model of gender is defined by cisnormativity, aligning with sex in a predetermined, binary way.

Butler's exploration of human intelligibility as composed of norms (such as cisnormativity) is also pertinent to this discussion:

²²⁴ Melville, p. 281.

²²⁵ Stephen Whittle, 'Foreword', p. xiii.

When we ask, what are the conditions of intelligibility by which the human emerges, by which the human is recognized, by which some subject becomes the subject of human love, we are asking about conditions of intelligibility composed of norms, of practices, that have become presuppositional, without which we cannot think the human at all.²²⁶

These strictures that define the human are very visible in the depiction of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature. When these characters do not meet what Butler calls the ‘conditions of intelligibility’, they become inconceivable as human characters, and are stripped of their figurative humanity or are never granted literal humanity in the first place.²²⁷ Cisgender characters and the non-binary characters who gain their approval (or are otherwise figuratively humanised) are permitted gendered pronouns. Non-binary characters who are not granted approval must make do with the dehumanising *it*, and be rendered as “less” than those around them. With the presentation of non-binary gender as subject to external definition, the connection of non-binary gender to a lack of figurative humanity, and the association of non-binary gender with the uncanny, it is clear that the Othering of non-binary gender in these texts demonstrates a strong resistance to the idea of non-binary as part of normal human gender.

Literal Inhumanity in Non-Binary Characters

The Myrddraal, the Stranger, Sa, Mornhavon the Black - these examples demonstrate the strength of the connection drawn, in pseudo-medieval fantasy particularly, between a character’s literal humanity and their gender. This is connected to the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre’s plethora of hetero- and cis-normative cultures, as the significance placed upon the supposedly unalterable established categories of gender leads quite easily to the labelling of any character who does not align with these categories as other than human. This

²²⁶ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 57.

²²⁷ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 57.

leads to both figurative dehumanisation, where the character in question is not granted the same level of complexity and depth as other characters, and literal dehumanisation, where non-binary gender is only seen in non-human characters. An optimistic interpretation might be that non-human characters provide a natural space in which genre fiction can explore non-binary gender, as in theory there is no reason for them to be bound by the same limitations as human characters. This can sometimes be seen in science fiction texts – for example, Becky Chambers’ *A Closed and Common Orbit* (2016) features a major character from a species that has ‘a four-gendered society’; this character is one of the ‘shons, who cyclically shifted reproductive roles’ (and with them, pronouns).²²⁸ This novel depicts non-binary gender without ever addressing the possibility of human non-binary gender. While this framing does not necessarily allow for the concept of human non-binary gender as something that exists, it nevertheless allows for the existence of non-binary characters who merit attention, empathy, and significance to the reader. This is a stepping-stone to inclusion of human non-binary characters, and allows more room for non-binary gender.

This is not the case in pseudo-medieval fantasy. Instead of the non-human character becoming a space in which to positively explore possibilities outside a strictly gendered framework, non-binary gender is associated with predominantly negative and/or non-human traits. If the character is considered more positive (Sa) or even neutral (the Stranger), they are often even further removed from humanity by being characters without voices or direct depictions in the text. For example, the description of the Stranger as ‘less and more than human’ serves to emphasise how distant the Stranger is from the other characters in the text – they are unreachable, and never make a direct appearance.²²⁹ These non-binary characters do

²²⁸ Chambers, p. 73.

²²⁹ Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, p. 449.

not demonstrate inclusion of non-binary gender as a human trait – rather, applying non-binary gender to a character is used primarily to signal the peculiar, the uncanny, and the monstrous, serving as a shorthand for the non-human. In this way, pseudo-medieval fantasy’s presentation of these characters positions non-binary gender as something which not only may not exist in the real world, but is also not worthy of the same level of attention, empathy, and significance to the reader that a human character would be.

The depiction of non-binary characters as predominantly non-human is also a way in which the Othering of non-binary gender differs from the Othering of women. While de Beauvoir argues that the Othering of women denies them equal humanity with men, and this certainly applies to the cisgender/non-binary dynamic, the way in which non-binary gender is Othered does not only deny non-binary people equal *humanity* with cisgender people, but also denies them equal *reality* with cisgender people. In other words, while the importance and even humanity of women has often been denied through the act of Othering, the existence of women has not – women are always assumed to exist, even if only as specific stereotypes with no real independent identity of their own. Kitzinger and Wilkinson refer to this as ‘the central claim that Otherness is projected on to women by, and in the interests of, men, such that we are constructed as inferior or abnormal’.²³⁰ However, in the cisgender/non-binary dynamic the presence of the non-binary gender has in some contexts been effectively Othered in such a way as to deny its existence, despite real-world evidence. This is visible in real-world erasure of alternative understandings of gender; Ben Vincent and Ana Manzano state in their piece on the history and cultural diversity of non-binary gender that ‘[a]rticulations of gender incorporating aspects of *both* male and female, neither, or alternative possibilities are

²³⁰ Kitzinger and Wilkinson, p. 4.

[...] rarely acknowledged'.²³¹ This lack of acknowledgement is built in to societal structures; Rob Clucas and Stephen Whittle state that '[o]ur social and legal structures insist that gender is binary'.²³² It also appears repeatedly in research into the non-binary experience – Eris Young explains that '[m]any nonbinary experiences survey participants ascribed their reluctance to be out at work to the fact that, often, nonbinary people are simply not acknowledged to exist'.²³³ To return to the examples of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature: in many of the pre-2017 examples, this lack of acknowledgement of the existence of non-binary gender is demonstrated by the emphasis on the idea that the cisnormative binary is a human feature and non-binary gender is non-human.

Figurative Inhumanity in Non-Binary Characters

Non-binary characters also have their figurative humanity and their importance denied as part of being Othered, but it is uncommon to see them even acknowledged as existing in the same way that cisgender characters do. In this way, the resistance of the genre to the concept of human non-binary gender is reinforced by the implication that even if a character of non-binary gender appears to be as ordinary as other characters, their uncanny, non-human gender is enough to mark this supposedly “normal” character as other than human. This is made particularly clear in depictions where figurative or literal humanisation and figurative or literal dehumanisation are held in tension.

In the case of the three pre-2017 examples of human non-binary characters – Jumper, Sweets, and the High Priest of Helgrind – elements of strangeness and implications of magical

²³¹ Vincent and Manzano, p. 12.

²³² Rob Clucas and Stephen Whittle, 'Law', in *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*, ed. by Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman and Meg-John Barker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 73-99 (p. 77).

²³³ Eris Young, p. 128.

influence are still wound into their characters. Jumper's shifting presentation is entirely magical, allowing him to be perceived completely differently by different characters. Sweets has 'purple hair and violet eyes' and is joined in the *grotesquerie* by 'a two-headed girl'.²³⁴ The High Priest of Helgrind has 'one of the most formidable minds Eragon had ever encountered' in terms of magical power.²³⁵ While the aforementioned elements of Sweets and the High Priest are not tied specifically to their gender/s or lack thereof, neither are they specifically rendered as distinctly separate issues. All three examples are rendered unusual or atypically human in specific ways, despite being literally human.

The presentations of the High Priest, Jumper, and Sweets use a juxtaposition of human *and* non-human elements to create an uncomfortable tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar. In the case of the Myrddraal, the Stranger, and Brett's demons, their non-human elements are varied (the Myrddraal's ability to see without eyes, for example); but in the case of the High Priest, Jumper, and Sweets, their monstrous or uncanny elements almost solely strongly tied to their non-binary gender. Jumper's ability to shift to other genders is the source of this tension in his depiction, encapsulated in the following sentence: '[t]he creature was certainly human'.²³⁶ The juxtaposition of *creature* with *human* – Jumper's humanity is being asserted, but it is significant that it needs to be. This is not the case for other characters in the text, whose humanity is assumed. And the shift in genders is the primary reason for this, as seen in the description of Jumper's voice: 'This little creature's voice slithered, so that one moment he sounded like a boy, the next like a girl'.²³⁷ The phrasing is not positive – both *creature* and *slithered* feed into this feeling of discomfort, and it is notable how often dislike of Jumper manifests as dehumanisation in one way or another. For example, the way that the

²³⁴ Martin, *A Dance With Dragons Part Two: After the Feast*, p. 106.

²³⁵ Paolini, *Inheritance*, p. 309.

²³⁶ Nicholson, p. 4.

²³⁷ Nicholson, p. 206.

background character who objects to Jumper calming her guard dogs addresses him: ‘You – you – thing!’.²³⁸ Immediately after this, we see Jumper shift to an older figure in response, a shift that is successful in ending the interaction for no specifically given reason. Jumper’s figurative humanity shifts and moves, and much of this is signified by pronouns and descriptions of him.

Primarily, Sweets’ lack of figurative humanity comes from his/her position as part of Yezzan zo Qaggaz’s ‘*grotesqueri*’.²³⁹ While nothing specifically indicates that Sweets is anything other than human, his/her defining characteristic is his/her non-typical anatomy – a feature that has granted him/her the position in Yezzan zo Qaggaz’s collection of unusual beings, referred to as ‘treasures’ and treated as more objects than people.²⁴⁰

In these ways, tension is created between the figurative humanisation and dehumanisation of the characters. This tension is an example of the uncanny. Freud’s 1919 essay states that ‘the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar’.²⁴¹ By creating an unresolved tension between the human and the supposedly non-human, these non-binary characters are rendered uncanny, both frighteningly unfamiliar in some ways and reassuringly familiar in others. These characters walk a line between appealing to and repelling the sympathies of their fellow characters and, by extension, the reader. The way in which gender plays into this, however, is relevant to how non-binary characters have been presented in fantasy literature. The use of *it*, for example, positions their non-binary gender as uncanny and part of their lack of humanity, reinforcing this negative depiction of non-binary gender and, as with previous examples, again evoking

²³⁸ Nicholson, p. 205.

²³⁹ Martin, *A Dance With Dragons Part Two: After the Feast*, p. 106.

²⁴⁰ Martin, *A Dance With Dragons Part Two: After the Feast*, p. 106.

²⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 124.

Butler's concept of 'those "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform'.²⁴² A character who *appears to be a person* but is then found to fail the definition of person – for example, by not being gendered according to cisnormative binary expectations – can be considered uncanny, generating a tension between their human and non-human aspects (whether literal or figurative).

Paolini's High Priest of Helgrind is an interesting example of this tension. The High Priest is, if anything, figuratively *dehumanised*. Depicted as the leader of a religion that regularly sacrifices limbs and people to the evil Ra'zac, Paolini's choice of the pronoun *it* is unsurprising.²⁴³ However, the High Priest is *literally* human. Referred to constantly as *it* and labelled as sexless with its lack of arms, legs, and possibly other unspecified anatomical features, the High Priest's non-binary gender and designation as less than human are connected without real distinction to the immorality of its worship and actions. This depiction tends more towards the wholly monstrous but there nevertheless remains an element of tension between the literal humanity of the High Priest and the figurative inhumanity as emphasised by the use of the pronoun *it*. The horror evoked by the depiction of the High Priest is not quite the same as that evoked by, for example, the Ra'zac that the High Priest worships. The Ra'zac are monstrous 'creatures', divorced from the expectations of humanity despite having near-human intelligence.²⁴⁴

[...] they aren't human. When I glimpsed one's head, it appeared to have something resembling a beak and black eyes as large as my fist – though how they manage our speech is a mystery to me. Doubtless the rest of their bodies are just as twisted.²⁴⁵

²⁴² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 23.

²⁴³ Christopher Paolini, *Brisingr* (London: Corgi, 2011), p. 1-5.

²⁴⁴ Paolini, *Brisingr*, p. 45.

²⁴⁵ Christopher Paolini, *Eragon* (London: Corgi, 2005), p. 103-104.

In contrast, the High Priest is a human who has chosen to become aligned with them, something demonstrated by bodily alteration. This very line of thought leads to the perceived interconnection between identity and body that is common to many pseudo-medieval fantasy texts, something I will be exploring in the next section of this thesis. In the context of human/non-human tension, however, the High Priest is a clear example of the way in which instead of allowing that, in Stephen Whittle's words, 'a person is the gender they claim to be, regardless of sex status', gender in these pseudo-medieval fantasy texts is predicated on certain pre-existing assumptions.²⁴⁶ Some of these assumptions are about anatomy, certainly, but others are about what it means to be human. The High Priest's humanity is in question, both literally present and figuratively absent, and this tension is partly produced by the High Priest being 'seemingly sexless'; the connection between sexlessness and genderlessness is not inherent, but it is so consistently emphasised in the text that the High Priest is inevitably rendered genderless in any case.²⁴⁷

The Future of the Inhuman Non-Binary

Non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy pre-2017 is frequently written as a non-human trait. In many cases it is attributed solely to characters who are literally not human, framing gender in the way that Butler describes as 'conditions of intelligibility composed of norms, of practices, that have become presuppositional, without which we cannot think the human at all'.²⁴⁸ In other cases non-binary gender is used to signify the uncanniness of a character despite their literal humanity, something made possible by the association between non-binary gender and the non-human. This means that even entirely human characters such as Sweets and the High Priest of Helgrind are framed as uncanny and figuratively inhuman in

²⁴⁶ Whittle, 'Foreword', p. xiii.

²⁴⁷ Paolini, *Inheritance*, p. 288.

²⁴⁸ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 57.

ways that are specifically tied to their non-binary gender. All the pre-2017 non-binary characters that I have discussed are Othered, specifically as non-human or as failing in some way to perform gender (and therefore humanity) as cisnormativity allows. The 2017 emergence of Sal and Tashi, whose humanity is not in question and whose non-binary gender is framed as a comparatively unremarkable aspect of their identity, demonstrates a tremendous shift in the way non-binary characters are being depicted in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature.

Gender and Anatomy

The third component of the Othering of non-binary characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature is the conflation of gender with anatomy. This mirrors the way in which the association between non-binary gender and a lack of literal humanity contributes to Othering, in that both contribute to framing non-binary gender as less possible for humans. The conflation of gender with anatomy can be accompanied by overly simplistic binary categories of anatomy, or it can encompass magical elements such as shapeshifting or bodiless consciousness. In this section I will be addressing the detrimental effect that this conflation has on the accuracy and diversity of the genre's depiction of non-binary gender, as well as exploring its roots not just in the genre's loyalty to traditional gender roles but also in a fundamental, perceived connection between the body and identity.

Conflating gender with anatomy firstly has the effect of depicting gender as something that can easily be determined by an external source. This also allows gender to be treated in much the same way as other physical attributes –gender is assumed to be inscribed on the body in a visible and confirmable manner. Tam Sanger describes the societal norm that pseudo-medieval fantasy typically adheres to in this way:

Hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality rely upon the assumption, sex → gender → sexuality, where it is presumed that the physical sex assigned at birth through visual discernment of genitals precedes identification as a particular gender, and gender must be known before sexuality can be articulated and publicly recognised. The understandings of sex, gender and sexuality imaginable within this conceptualisation are figured with respect to the binaries of vagina/penis, female/male and homosexual/heterosexual, thus allowing for only a limited number of permutations. Further, it is presumed that these categories will only combine in specific ways, such that penis = male and vagina = female, and each in its 'normal' configuration will lead to a heterosexual sexuality.²⁴⁹

The idea that one's body and physical appearance reflects one's identity is not something solely limited to discussions of gender. It is particularly thoroughly explored in disability studies; Sami Schalk discusses how '[p]hysical deformity or impairment has often been traditionally seen as connected to a bad mental or spiritual state of being' and that '[t]his connection, within disability studies, is referred to as the moral model of disability'.²⁵⁰

Examples of this type of simple signalling are where, Katie Harper argues, 'the heroes and heroines are always attractive and the villain is identifiable by his or her ugliness or deformity'.²⁵¹ This becomes particularly dramatic in the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre by the frequently straightforward division between hero and villain. In this framing, all bodies that are not classed as "normal" or "ideal" risk being firmly categorised as evil, as the perceived physical flaw (being disabled, not being white, not embodying gender in a socially acceptable way) is seen as indicative of a flawed identity. Ian Frederick Moulton, discussing the particularly famous example of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, argues that it 'is this unregulated, destructive masculine force that is personified in the twisted and deformed body

²⁴⁹ Tam Sanger, 'Trans governmentality: the production and regulation of gendered subjectivities', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 17.1 (2008), 41-43 (p. 42) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589230701838396>>.

²⁵⁰ Schalk, para. 5 of 9.

²⁵¹ Katie Harper, 'The Physicality of Deviance in the Nancy Drew Mystery Series', *Thinking Gender Papers* (2010) (p. 2) <<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2gz539tr>> [accessed 4 January 2019].

of Richard III'.²⁵² This is only one example from this trend. In pseudo-medieval fantasy the association between physical “abnormality” and evil is often fairly obvious, with examples from Gollum in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) right up to Mornhaddon the Black in Kristen Britain’s ‘Green Rider’ series (1998-present day). A noteworthy contemporary example is, of course, the High Priest of Helgrind.

The High Priest is a human character, but as discussed in the previous section of this thesis, also one whose depiction strongly emphasises figurative inhumanity and uncanniness. The High Priest has chosen to worship the evil Ra’zac and in doing so alter its body drastically – if one accepts the premise that evil manifests in the body, then the fact that the High Priest altered its body in pursuit of evil clearly reflects that premise. The alteration of the body and the pursuit of evil are entangled, and the altered body represents the evil achieved. This is emphasised by the reaction of other characters in the text. Eragon, the protagonist, witnesses a younger follower of the order amputating his own hand as part of his worship of the Ra’zac, and his reaction is clear:

Eragon winced and averted his eyes, although he could not escape the youth’s piercing screams. It was nothing Eragon had not seen in battle, but it seemed wrong to deliberately mutilate yourself when it was so easy to become disfigured in everyday life.²⁵³

The emphasis is on the choice of the individual being one that reflects his direction of worship; there is some allowance for the idea that a similar injury could occur in another context without being considered an indicator of evil. Nevertheless, the connection between a supposedly abnormal body and an evil person is clearly made.

²⁵² Ian Frederick Moulton, “‘A Monster Great Deformed’: The Unruly Masculinity of Richard III’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 47.3 (1996), 251-268 (p. 258).

²⁵³ Paolini, *Brisingsr*, p. 5.

A similar tactic can be seen in the common depiction of enemy countries in some pseudo-medieval fantasy texts as uniformly unsympathetic, from the east or south of the fictional landscape, and racially coded in a way that evokes non-white and/or non-western cultures. Sue Kim states that in the film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* ‘goodness correlates to whiteness, both racially and as a color scheme, and is associated with Europe [...] Evil is invariably black, savage, Southern (or “Southron”), and Eastern’, and points out that ‘[t]he films generally draw their racial and color-coding from the novels’.²⁵⁴ In short, in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature, evil is often something identifiable not just by physical appearance but specifically by the way in which that appearance differs from the perceived norm or ideal. The physical body is fundamentally tied to identity, and in much the same way, gender is conflated with anatomy. As in the cases of disability and race, this framework can then be used to mark non-binary characters as flawed, as Other, and as evil.

The refusal or rejection of a body that is not gendered according to cisnormative demands returns us to the ideas about deception that I discussed in chapter one of this thesis. In a cisnormative framework, the body is a truth that informs or generates gender – certain anatomy must align with a certain gender expression. If the body is a truth that also dictates the good or evil of the character, then any refusal to align with traditional meanings of the body (such as specific anatomy equalling a specific gender) is interpreted as deception. Halberstam discusses ‘what kinds of truth about gender we demand from the lives of people who pass, cross-dress, or simply refuse normative gender categories’, and it is significant that the word Halberstam uses is *demand*.²⁵⁵ A cisnormative framework *requires* that gender have

²⁵⁴ Sue Kim, ‘Beyond Black and White: Race and Postmodernism in The Lord Of The Rings Films’, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 50.4 (2004), 875-907 (p. 875).

²⁵⁵ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, p. 48.

a specific type of presumed truth behind it, in the way that it aligns with anatomy. This can lead to seemingly non-binary characters being eventually given a male or female gender; Brian Attebery states that ‘it is possible to force the ambiguous character into a more conventional category; by the story’s end, the author or reader (or both in collusion) discovers the “real” gender of the character and reinterprets events accordingly’.²⁵⁶ This forcing into a conventional category is treated as a necessary part of the resolution for the story; the character must be resolved into something acceptable by cisnormative standards, which must in turn mean a confirmation of their anatomy. For non-binary characters whose identity remains stable, this often means that their gender is being anchored by a specific anatomical configuration or physical fact – Jumper’s shifting physicality, for example, or Sweets’ intersex anatomy. If not, the non-binary character is absent from the resolution because of their comparative irrelevance to the plot – they are not important enough to the narrative, and therefore disappear or are removed.

An example that demonstrates the way in which evil can be associated with a non-cisnormative body is the depiction of Christopher Paolini’s High Priest of Helgrind. This character is first introduced in *Brisingr* (2008), the third of the four-book sequence, as seen from a distance:

Their leader sat upright upon a litter borne by six oiled slaves, a pose Eragon regarded as a rather amazing accomplishment, considering that the man or woman – he could not tell which – consisted of nothing more than a torso and a head, upon whose brow balanced an ornate leather crest three feet high.²⁵⁷

In the fourth and final book, the High Priest reappears – this time in much closer proximity to the book’s protagonists in a sequence that culminates in the High Priest’s death:

²⁵⁶ Attebery, p. 9.

²⁵⁷ Paolini, *Brisingr*, p. 1-2.

And last of all, six oiled slaves carried in a bier, upon which, propped upright, rested an armless, legless, toothless, seemingly sexless figure: the High Priest of Helgrind. From its head rose a three-foot-high crest, which only made the creature appear even more misshapen.²⁵⁸

Initially, the High Priest's gender is treated as an unknown – understandable, perhaps, given that the viewpoint characters are a fair distance away. Unsurprisingly, only two possible options are given: 'man or woman'.²⁵⁹ Throughout not just the quoted extract but the full passage from which it comes, the first depiction of the High Priest is carefully phrased to avoid the use of any pronoun – no *he*, *she*, *it*, or *they*. When necessary, the High Priest is referred to as 'the creature', a dehumanising term used throughout both appearances, but it is only in the second appearance that the pronoun use is added.²⁶⁰ In the reappearance of the High Priest in the following book, the depiction of the character as less than human is more thoroughly emphasised. For example, the entrance in contrast to that of the previous book. The impressive implications of the High Priest's posture is gone – they are now 'propped upright' – and the phrasing around gender has changed.²⁶¹ Instead of an unknown gender, the High Priest is now 'an armless, legless, toothless, seemingly sexless figure' who is referred to as *it* in the following sentence.²⁶² The dehumanising language continues through the chapter, culminating in the death of the High Priest whose last descriptions have it 'thrash like a hooked fish', and depict how 'an unearthly howl emanated from its throat, and the whole of the cathedral rang with the creature's baying'.²⁶³

²⁵⁸ Paolini, *Inheritance*, p. 288.

²⁵⁹ Paolini, *Brisingr*, p. 2.

²⁶⁰ Paolini, *Brisingr*, p. 2.

²⁶¹ Paolini, *Inheritance*, p. 288.

²⁶² Paolini, *Inheritance*, p. 288.

²⁶³ Paolini, *Inheritance*, p. 310.

The three points are strongly connected: the gender or lack thereof of the High Priest, the body of the High Priest, and the evil of the High Priest. Harper's argument that 'the heroes and heroines are always attractive and the villain is identifiable by his or her ugliness or deformity' is clearly visible.²⁶⁴ This interconnection creates a powerful example of the way in which inscribing identity on the body impacts the representation of non-binary gender in fiction. The conflation of gender with anatomy – something that is so intrinsic to Paolini's texts as well as the vast majority of the pseudo-medieval fantasy gender, but that is rarely if ever mentioned explicitly – means that potential non-binary characters such as Paolini's High Priest can be further Othered by the typically negative coding of non-normative bodies.

Overall, these trends in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature create a very restrictive approach to gender not just by its conflation with anatomy but also by framing the most stereotypical binary categories as the desirable, safe norm and any nonconformity as risky at best, and fundamentally flawed at worst. This in turn allows little to no room for the representation of non-binary gender at all, let alone as a positive or ordinary characteristic. When these strictures (of the stereotypical male/female binary) are carried over to the presentation of non-binary gender the conflation of gender with anatomy is often given precedence over other interpretations, resulting in dehumanisation – the character's gender as presupposed based upon their anatomy is used as part of what makes them monstrous (Paolini's High Priest) or beyond human understanding (Hobb's Sa, Martin's Stranger). The Stranger, for example, is described as 'neither male nor female, yet both', and this is framed as being due to their position as a deity of death and the unknown.²⁶⁵ However, in other cases a character's non-binary gender or intersex anatomy is framed as specifically the cause of their Otherness.

²⁶⁴ Harper, p. 2.

²⁶⁵ Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, p. 449.

Sweets is a very clear example of this, given that his/her intersex anatomy is presented as the reason for his/her position in Yezzan zo Qaggaz's collection of unusual beings:

“You are trying to decide if I'm a man or woman,” Sweets said, when she was brought before the dwarfs. Then she lifted her skirts and showed them what was underneath. “I'm both, and master loves me best.”²⁶⁶

The Myrddraal, Brett's demons, Mornhavon the Black, the Stranger, the High Priest of Helgrind, Jumper, and Sweets – all of these characters are presented in ways which demonstrate this perceived correspondence between body and gender, from Sweets' intersex anatomy and implied non-binary gender to Britain's use of narration describing Mornhavon the Black in such a way as to imply that to have no body is to have no gender at all. This returns us to Halberstam's question about ‘what kinds of truth about gender we demand’; in this case, the required revelation of anatomy that is perceived to correlate with non-binary gender according to cisnormativity.²⁶⁷ Requiring an anatomical correspondence of some kind allows a cisnormative system to continue to enforce the conflation of gender and anatomy by devising a way to incorporate non-binary gender in the same pattern.

This representation is further complicated by the significance placed, in the fantasy genre and particularly in pseudo-medieval fantasy, on gender roles. While male characters and female characters are provided with a relatively rigid framework for behaviour, appearance, and the ways in which their gender “should” be embodied, non-binary characters have none.

Although theoretically this allows a space for the breaking of traditional categorisation, or for the creation of an entirely new framework, in practical terms it more commonly causes a minimisation and dismissal of non-binary characters. Non-binary characters in pseudo-

²⁶⁶ Martin, *A Dance With Dragons Part Two: After the Feast*, p. 106.

²⁶⁷ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, p. 48.

medieval fantasy, like male and female characters, are frequently if not consistently made to demonstrate themselves in a way that aligns with the gender (or lack thereof) that their anatomy is believed to prove them to be. However, for non-binary characters, there are very few precedents as to how this should be presented; in a strictly binary-gendered fictional society, they do not have an established, traditional, gender-based role to play. In many examples, it therefore manifests as a strong association with mystery, ambiguity, uncertainty, strangeness, monstrosity, or Otherness – or any combination of those traits. In the example given in the previous paragraph, Sweets' position in the text is due to his/her non-binary gender (as conflated with his/her intersex anatomy) – the non-binary role, here, is that of an oddity.

As the “male” and “female” categories of gender are presented as mandatory, and natural variance is dismissed in favour of strict categorisation, there is not only no space permitted for alternative concepts – there is an active resistance to them. When discussing the concept of the trickster, something that non-binary characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy frequently evoke, Lewis Hyde describes the gender binary as being among many ‘enduring structures (in nature, society, the human psyche) [that] are resistant to fundamental change, by which I mean change that alters the givens of those structures themselves’, and as such cannot tolerate alternative concepts for fear of destabilisation.²⁶⁸ Hyde’s description of a trickster is one that embodies the disruption of these enduring categories. Non-binary gender is a fundamental change and disruption to the cisnormative gender binary, and as such receives considerable resistance. This defensiveness of cisnormativity leads to non-binary gender being minimised and erased where possible, and rendered non-human or monstrous where not – in either case, thoroughly Othered. Observing the representation of non-binary gender

²⁶⁸ Hyde, p. 118.

in such strictly cisnormative texts is as revealing of the overwhelming significance placed on gender roles as it is of the conflation of gender with anatomy. However, as we have seen in earlier sections, the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre is beginning to move past these limitations. The 2017 examples of Miller's Sal and Ember's Tashi address the conflation of gender with anatomy quite directly.

Both Tashi and Sal's texts feature corrections of assumptions made about their gender; it is likely, given that their fictional cultural contexts are depicted as fundamentally cisnormative even when non-binary gender is accepted, that these assumptions are being made on the basis of either anatomy or presentation. An example of this type of correction from *The Tiger's Watch* is this exchange between the commander (at this point in the narrative, a clear villain) and Pharo, Tashi's best friend:

Shoulders relaxing, the commander turned my hand over. His grip gentled. "He'll do."
"They," Pharo piped up from the floor beside me. I could have kissed him but Ugyen cast us a cutting glare.
"Excuse me?" the commander demanded.
"Tashi isn't a boy."²⁶⁹

This scene is used not to give the reader Tashi's pronouns (which we already know from narration earlier in the book) but to demonstrate character – Pharo is someone who respects Tashi, the commander's response following the indented quote will reveal if he is willing to respect Tashi's identity or not and therefore how much he might be trusted, and Ugyen's 'cutting glare' could be contextualised in multiple ways but certainly does not reflect well on him in this moment. It also serves to emphasise Pharo and Tashi's friendship, and, in turn, the value that Tashi places on being gendered correctly – in the form of being referred to by the

²⁶⁹ Ember, p. 23.

correct pronoun. Pharo's correction is met, in the narration, with Tashi's adulation: 'I could have kissed him'.²⁷⁰ Where many previous narratives would, as Attebery describes, 'force the ambiguous character into a more conventional category', *The Tiger's Watch* instead forces the cisnormative character to adjust to the non-binary.²⁷¹ This passage, like other similar passages through the text, emphasises that respecting Tashi's gender and pronouns are positively viewed actions – and prioritises Tashi's gender over reductive, cisnormative assumptions that are based on anatomy. This framing demonstrates the impact of transgender and non-binary activism on pseudo-medieval fantasy literature – not only is the non-binary character the main character, but their gender is deserving of respect, and the narrative position of other characters can be judged based on how much of that respect they show.

Linsey Miller's 'Mask of Shadows' duology displays some very similar exchanges, where other characters demonstrate their support for Sal by correcting pronouns or their disregard for Sal by misgendering them. There is also space given to exchanges with more layers of complexity, such as this one from *Ruin of Stars* that takes place between Sal and Sal's female love interest, Elise:

"I am concerned about the others in Hinter who don't follow Erlend tradition, the ones like me who are attracted to men and women. It's not smiled upon, and I don't want them to be stuck in a place that denies them like I was before I went to Igna. It's Erlend that's wrong, but I say that, they'll kill me and then there will be no one here." I winced. Good intentions, bad execution.

Always so focused on man and woman, man or woman.

"I'm not a man or a woman," I said slowly. "My gender doesn't change from day to day. I am fluid. You do not get to define me by your attractions. I understand what you meant and I can't define you, but if you're attracted to me, I'm uncomfortable with that."

She raised a hand to her mouth. "I'm sorry. That's not what I –"

"I know," I said quickly. "Still hurts. Never mind that for now. Tell me more about Lena."²⁷²

²⁷⁰ Ember, p. 23.

²⁷¹ Attebery, p. 9.

²⁷² Miller, *Ruin of Stars*, p. 207.

Elise’s sexuality is queer, and she inadvertently expresses this queerness in a way that excludes Sal. By saying that she is ‘attracted to men and women’ she is either denying an attraction to the non-binary Sal, or misgendering Sal. Sal’s discomfort is obvious, and the correction that follows clarifies why; ‘my gender doesn’t change from day to day’ emphasises that Sal is non-binary all the time, regardless of how they are presenting or which pronouns they are using.²⁷³ In including these kinds of corrections as well as those similar to the above example from *The Tiger’s Watch*, The ‘Mask of Shadows’ duology has added a layer of sophistication to its depiction of non-binary gender and queerphobia. Misgendering is still framed negatively, but it is not the sole purview of “evil” characters – it can be an unintentional unkindness from an ally or a friend of the non-binary character, too. This is a development from a straightforward bigotry-as-evil model into a more complex depiction of non-binary characters existing in a fundamentally cisnormative culture in which even their allies are starting from cisnormative and non-binary unfriendly frameworks. This mirrors discussions that are happening as part of transgender and non-binary activism and outreach, particularly those around microaggressions. Microaggressions have many forms, including one referred to as ‘microinsults’. In their investigations into microaggressions experienced by queer families, Haines and others define microinsults as ‘communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and that demean a person’s identity’ noting that ‘[a]lthough they are often unintentional and sometimes even well intended, microinsults can offend or ridicule the recipient’.²⁷⁴ The exchange between Sal and Elise in the indented quote above is a demonstration of this issue – as Sal’s narration states, it can be a case of ‘[g]ood intentions,

²⁷³ Miller, *Ruin of Stars*, p. 207.

²⁷⁴ Kari M. Haines and others, “‘Not a Real Family’: Microaggressions Directed toward LGBTQ Families”, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 65.9 (2018), 1138-1151 (p. 1139) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1406217>>.

bad execution'.²⁷⁵ Including these smaller incidences in fiction identifies transphobia and queerphobia as more than just singular actions by villain characters, or societal rules that should be broken. Instead, it is reframed as an issue that is entrenched in the way a culture understands gender and sexuality, and therefore something that can come from any character – even, in the example of Elise, a character who is also part of the queer community in that society. Eleanor Formby, in her work on queer communities, explores how ‘experiences of hierarchies and prejudices amongst LGBT people bring into question a (singular) LGBT community’, and part of this complexity of experience is made visible in the above exchange between Elise and Sal.²⁷⁶ While their queerness gives them a connection, it does not constitute the complete absence of misunderstandings or transphobia.

The depictions of Sal and Tashi are a stark contrast with previous non-binary characters: anatomy, instead of being intensely significant, is now irrelevant and largely ignored except in demonstrations of bigotry. Even in such demonstrations, details of anatomy are obfuscated or evaded, remaining unconfirmed by the text, and the focus is shifted to the impact of the bigotry. This is much more in line with how non-binary and transgender communities discuss gender, as well as the concepts developed in queer theory and transgender studies. Before this point, pseudo-medieval fantasy texts largely confined themselves to a strict cisnormative understanding of gender, with non-binary character rare outliers who emphasised the connection between gender and the body even as they were Othered from the cisnormative binary.

²⁷⁵ Miller, *Ruin of Stars*, p. 207.

²⁷⁶ Formby, p. 39.

In *The Tiger's Watch* and the 'Mask of Shadows' duology, this logical chain is disrupted – the body is no longer taken as the truth that creates and confirms gender. Instead, self-identification is truth, and the body is not only less significant, it is irrelevant and rarely mentioned (at least in the context of gender). This is a drastic contrast with the previous examples discussed in this chapter, and not something seen commonly in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature. It is an approach that reflects Butler's concept of gender as performative, as well as embracing the activism of the transgender community which prioritises self-identification.

For most of the time period that I am covering in this thesis (1990-2017), pseudo-medieval fantasy literature has consistently conflated gender with anatomy. This is part of a broader association between identity and the body, which has been explored in many different fields of study – disability studies, for example, as well as feminist theory, queer theory and transgender studies. It is also connected to the prevalence of traditional gender roles in the genre, and contributes to the Othering of non-binary gender. More recently, in the examples published in 2017-18, there has been a dramatic shift in the depiction of non-binary gender. Some texts, such as Linsey Miller's 'Mask of Shadows' duology and Julia Ember's *The Tiger's Watch*, have disrupted the conflation between gender and anatomy and in some places disregarded it entirely. This indicates that the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre is beginning to respond to developments in queer theory and transgender studies, as well as non-binary activism.

Cisgender Self, Non-Binary Other

Throughout this chapter and the last, the reoccurring feature of the depiction of non-binary gender in pre-2017 pseudo-medieval fantasy has been the positioning it as part of a binary

dynamic – Self and Other, in which non-binary gender is firmly placed as the Other to a binary, cisgender Self. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, it can seem counter-intuitive to frame non-binary gender as part of a binary. However, while non-binary gender steps outside the male/female binary dynamic enforced by cisnormativity, the reaction to the breaking open of that binary is the creation of another binary. Jay Stewart, discussing academic theory on non-binary gender, states that ‘trans and non-binary people have emerged as queer emblems who, through their very presentation of difference, expose the various constructions of gender, demonstrating opposition to the dominant forces of strict gender codes and practices, and revealing gender construction’.²⁷⁷ The very existence of non-binary gender functions as a disruption of cisnormativity and an exposure of the constructed or performative nature of gender itself. Resistance to this in turn produces the binary of Self and Other between the cisnormative and its disruption.

Non-binary gender is not the only breaking of the binary gender dynamic – binary transgender people also undermine the cisnormative male/female dynamic by refusing that dynamic’s rigid assertion of the connection between anatomy and gender.

Cisgender/transgender (the latter includes non-binary gender) then becomes a binary; overlapping and intersecting with it, there is the binary/non-binary dynamic, which typically features the erasure or minimisation of binary transgender people – something I will discuss further below.

Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson, in *Representing the Other: A Feminism & Psychology Reader*, explicate the Self/Other dynamic in a particularly useful way:

²⁷⁷ Stewart, p. 62.

A key aspect of the various theoretical approaches to Othering (albeit differently treated by each), is the observation that the notion of who and what Others are (what they are like, the attributes assigned them, the sorts of lives they are supposed to lead) is intimately related to 'our' notion of who and what 'we' are. That is, 'we' use the Other to define ourselves: 'we' understand ourselves in relation to what 'we' are *not*.²⁷⁸

Kitzinger and Wilkinson are focusing primarily on women as the Other in their work, but also add that 'women are not the only Others'.²⁷⁹ Their explorations of the Self/Other dynamic have multiple applications, and in analysing the non-binary Other it is useful to consider previous work on gender and the Other even if it does not account for non-binary gender. Reflecting the indented quote above, the depictions of non-binary gender as Other in pseudo-medieval fantasy texts are not just reflecting attitudes towards non-binary gender – they also serve to demonstrate how their texts understand binary gender and cisnormativity, and how strongly these are intertwined with ideas about morality, truth, and reliability.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that the Self/Other dynamic that exists between male and female means that certain attributes are assigned to each party. De Beauvoir identifies the male attributes as being the subject, the self, the essential, and the absolute, and the female attributes as being the object, the other, the inessential, and the incomplete.²⁸⁰ These attributes influence how the dynamic between men and women is enacted, and the ways in which the Othering of women occurs in this dynamic. Although de Beauvoir's work focuses specifically on the male/female binary, it nevertheless provides a useful model for considering the ways in which the Self/Other dynamic of cisgender/non-binary interacts with the presentation of non-binary characters. Based on the examples of the presentation of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy texts that have been examined

²⁷⁸ Kitzinger and Wilkinson, p. 8.

²⁷⁹ Kitzinger and Wilkinson, p. 7.

²⁸⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

in this chapter and chapter one, the Self/Other dynamic between cisgender characters and non-binary characters places cisgender characters as real, consistent, clear, and rational, while placing non-binary characters as unreal, inconsistent, confusing, and absurd.

Real/Unreal

The first pair of attributes in this concept is real/unreal, in which cisgender characters' gender/s are framed as real in contrast to the supposedly fictional, invented, or even fantastical gender/s of non-binary characters.

Real is a problematic term to use, as it carries a great deal of theoretical weight and complexity behind it, and can have multiple applications and meanings. However, it does merit careful use in this context, as it has significance specifically to anti-non-binary sentiment, transphobia, and non-binary-specific queerphobia. Non-binary people often live with the absence of legal and medical recognition of their gender – Meg-John Barker and Alex Iantaffi describe the way in which '[f]alling outside the gender binary means that they experience erasure and invisibility (people rarely recognising or validating their gender)'.²⁸¹ This describes something closer to a valid/invalid dynamic than a real/unreal, and the latter feeds into the former in language that is used to dismiss non-binary people. S. Bear Bergman discusses an incident of transphobia that he experienced in these terms: 'one, that this professor arrogated to herself the right to decide whether a word was "real" or not, and two, that she obviously felt this power extended to my gender identity (and that of many other people)'.²⁸² Young's examination of non-binary survey participants states that 'often,

²⁸¹ Meg-John Barker and Alex Iantaffi, 'Psychotherapy', in *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*, ed. by Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman and Meg-John Barker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 103-124 (p. 106).

²⁸² Bergman, p. 39.

nonbinary people are simply not acknowledged to exist'.²⁸³ And returning to Barker and Iantaffi, their writing on psychotherapy for non-binary patients argues that 'Butler's idea that *all* gender is performative can be helpful to share with non-binary clients to reassure them that their experience is no less 'real' than that of people with binary genders'.²⁸⁴ The idea that non-binary gender is literally unreal – not just unacceptable, or not valid, or illegitimate, but not something which exists – is obviously absurd.

Even if one proposes that non-binary gender is not a valid gender, or is not what it is claimed to be, people who identify as non-binary are clearly present. However, this idea of realness persists; partly, this reflects the challenges around how to describe and discuss non-binary gender – Talbot, Atkinson, and Atkinson state that 'language plays a vital role in constituting people's realities', and with the language of non-binary gender (such as *nouveau* pronouns or *they* as singular) often being denied legitimacy, the perceived reality of non-binary gender is likewise delegitimised.²⁸⁵ It is also connected to the concept of deception that I discussed in chapter one of this thesis, framing non-binary gender as invention, as fantasy, as false. And therefore, the person claiming as a label is framed as at best deluded and at worst maliciously deceptive. This dynamic also evokes ideas about true/false, in which the truth is believed to be found in the body – that the way in which the true/false dichotomy is set alongside concepts of deception. If non-binary gender is framed as false (unreal, fictional), then that is set against the supposed truth of the body (which is presumed, incorrectly, to be limited to one of two categories), and that non-binary person is therefore seen as deceiving others. Talia Mae Bettcher, discussing transphobia, argues that 'it seems fair to say the deceiver representation (with its related identity enforcement) in and of itself constitutes considerable

²⁸³ Eris Young, p. 128.

²⁸⁴ Barker and Iantaffi, p. 110.

²⁸⁵ Talbot, Atkinson and Atkinson, p. 4.

emotional violence against transpeople through its impeachment of moral integrity and denials of authenticity'.²⁸⁶ Denial of authenticity is key here, as where cisgender is considered fact, non-binary gender is considered fiction. Only cisgender has authenticity. This classification is firmly connected to a cisnormative understanding of sex and gender which asserts the existence of only two sexes (despite the existence of intersex people, estimated to be 1.7% of the population by some studies) and only two genders which correspond to these two sexes in specific, observable, and consistent ways.²⁸⁷ In this understanding of gender, non-binary gender is not considered real in the way that male and female genders are. And while of course the pseudo-medieval fantasy texts that I am analysing are entirely fictional, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis there is a heavy emphasis in the genre on so-called realism, and it is common for some elements of the text to be framed as more realistic than others. In pseudo-medieval fantasy literature, this aspect of the cisgender/non-binary dynamic can be exaggerated by the “fantasy” – the presence of deliberately fantastical elements, amongst which the non-binary character is often placed. These elements are usually magic in general and/or a species that does not have a non-fictional existence (such as Brett’s demons) and is contrasted with the more supposedly realistic humans. When the non-binary character is positioned as part of the former element of the text, as is the case for all my pseudo-medieval examples in some way except Sweets and the more recent Sal and Tashi, an association can be seen between their non-binary gender and the fantastical, unreal elements of their character. The effect of this is aggravated when the vast majority of non-binary characters in the genre are framed this way, as the frequent repetition of this association not only both normalises and reinforces it but can also lead to outliers such as Sweets being dismissed.

²⁸⁶ Bettcher, p. 281.

²⁸⁷ Melanie Blackless and others, ‘How Sexually Dimorphic Are We? Review and Synthesis’, *American Journal of Human Biology*, 12.2 (2011), 151-166.

It is in this manner that the presentation of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature emphasises this aspect of the cisgender/non-binary Self/Other dynamic – and as mentioned earlier in this chapter, this can also be seen in other genres. Anamarija Šporčič argues that authors in science fiction, for example, ‘exhibit a tendency to ascribe non-binary gender identities to alien races, automatically pushing them into the inferior category of the Other’.²⁸⁸ This mirrors what I have discussed above – the significance of most non-binary characters being non-human, and the alignment of their non-binary gender with the non-human elements of them if they are human or largely human. By repeatedly and consistently categorising non-binary characters with the fantastical elements of the narrative, non-binary gender is either directly or indirectly presented as fictional – characters are non-binary by dint of their species/category of being (Brett’s demons, Mornhavon the Black, the Myrddraal, the Stranger, Sa), non-binary symbols (the Stranger, Sa), or non-binary shapeshifters (Jumper) – while the cisnormative understanding of gender remains unquestioned. Cisgender is therefore presented as real/factual, and non-binary gender as unreal/fictional.

Consistent/Inconsistent

The second pair of attributes is consistent/inconsistent, with cisgender being seen as a consistent identity and non-binary an inconsistent one. This is very much tied to the conflation of gender and anatomy; cisgender is considered to be consistent, at least in the sense that it is consistently identifiable and constrained by a physical fact. In contrast, non-binary gender is not anchored to physicality in the same way, and is therefore framed as changeable, subject to the whims of individuals, and inconsistent. If a cisnormative logic is followed, then the two sexes that correspond neatly and consistently with the two genders are

²⁸⁸ Šporčič, p. 64.

the only real system, and they must be a consistent one. Butler conceptualises gender as ‘the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being’.²⁸⁹ This can be seen in the emphasis on consistency and repetition around the formulation of cisgender identities. If gender can always be identified or confirmed by the shape and features of a person’s body, and this does not change, then it is a consistent concept. However, adherence to this understanding of gender requires the existence of intersex people to be completely ignored or at least classified as having some kind of illness or problem. It also erases transgender and non-binary experiences; Toby Beauchamp argues that on the occasion that the concept of binary transition is allowed for, it is often with ‘the expectation that trans people will, through the process of transition, eliminate all references to their birth gender and essentially disappear into a normatively gendered world, as if they had never been transgender to begin with’.²⁹⁰ This is a way in which cisnormativity impacts concepts of being transgender – it *might* be considered acceptable, *provided* it is invisible and can therefore be safely ignored rather than treated as a clear disruption of cisnormativity. Non-binary gender cannot be resolved in this manner (which is often not possible for binary transgender people either) and is therefore considered inconsistent. The framing of non-binary gender as inconsistent is particularly noticeable in the presentation of specifically genderfluid characters – by definition, if a character’s gender is fluid and changeable, it could be considered to be an inconsistent identity in that it changes rather than remaining the same. However, this instability is often treated as being merely one aspect of a greater instability. Take, for example, Nicholson’s *Jumper*: ‘you couldn’t quite get a fix on any part of him [...]

²⁸⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 45.

²⁹⁰ Toby Beauchamp, ‘Artful Concealment and Strategic Visibility: Transgender Bodies and the US State Surveillance After 9/11’, in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. by Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 46-55 (p. 47).

No part of him ever came to rest, but was always changing, becoming something else'.²⁹¹

Jumper is described as changing not only his gender but also his age and appearance depending on what is most needed by the situation. The way in which the alignment of non-binary characters with concepts of inconsistency is used in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature carries negative connotations. *Inconsistency* in this context is not being used as a neutral term implying changeability alone, it is also used to imply unreliability and untrustworthiness. This is evoked when a non-binary character is regularly associated with unpredictability as well as unreliability, and is often tied to ideas about deception – these will be discussed in more detail in chapter four. This framing of the cisgender/non-binary dynamic as consistent/inconsistent also connects to the ways in which acceptance of non-binary gender can be seen to destabilise cisnormativity – as not merely inconsistent and therefore unstable, but as having an actively destabilising effect on the accepted order of things. Judith Butler states that '[w]hether one refers to “gender trouble” or “gender blending,” “transgender” or “cross-gender,” one is already suggesting that gender has a way of moving beyond that naturalized binary’, and this concept is part of the association of non-binary gender with instability and inconsistency, in contrast with the supposed consistency and therefore stability of cisnormativity.²⁹² While many of the non-binary characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy are not labelled as *non-binary*, all of them engage in this concept of gender that does not fit into the male/female binary, troubling cisnormativity and destabilising rigid understandings of gender.

²⁹¹ Nicholson, p. 4.

²⁹² Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 42.

Clear/Confusing

The third pair of attributes in this concept is clear/confusing. This describes the framing of cisgender identities as straightforward and easily comprehensible in contrast to the framing of non-binary gender as inherently difficult to understand. There are three main components of this framing: the experiential, as discussed by non-binary people sharing information about how cisgender people respond to them; the theoretical, which relates to Butler's notion of cultural intelligibility; and then the way in which this appears in fiction, specifically in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature.

In Meg-John Barker and Alex Iantaffi's discussion of psychotherapy for non-binary patients, they state that 'most practitioners are likely to assume that their clients will be either male or female, and that most will be at best confused – and at worst dismissive – when confronted with a non-binary client'.²⁹³ They go on, then, to explain that '[m]ost found that they – as non-binary people – had to educate their teachers and supervisors on these matters, and that they were met with confusion and occasionally pathologisation and stigmatisation'.²⁹⁴ The concept that non-binary gender is less easily comprehensible than binary gender reoccurs throughout discussions of non-binary-specific queerphobia and manifests frequently in fictional depictions of non-binary gender. This concept is rooted in the prioritisation of the cisgender viewpoint, taking its foundation from the assumption that the reader will be much more familiar with a cisnormative concept of gender than one which includes non-binary gender. At its most extreme, it assumes that the concept of non-binary gender will be totally alien to the reader. This is not purely limited to fantasy, or indeed to fiction; Richards and others discuss how '[w]ithin mainstream media there is still a tendency towards a perhaps

²⁹³ Barker and Iantaffi, p. 108.

²⁹⁴ Barker and Iantaffi, p. 109.

patronizing “interest” which situates non-binary and genderqueer people as “other” to the assumed norm of the viewer’.²⁹⁵ Potential non-binary readers are not, in this model, accounted for. The reader is expected to be cisgender, looking out at the supposedly confusing puzzle of non-binary gender. This perspective is often mapped onto the protagonists or viewpoint characters when they encounter non-binary characters – for example, Albard encountering Jumper and wondering ‘what sort of thing is he anyway? Is he man or woman? Or something else altogether, for which we need a new name?’.²⁹⁶ A more thorough example of the impact of this kind of perspective (along with the ways in which it can change) is Fitz’s perspective on Beloved in Robin Hobb’s ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ series, which I will expand on in much greater detail in chapter four.

The clear/confusing dynamic is reflected in Judith Butler’s ideas around cultural intelligibility, which I have addressed to some degree in the previous chapter. Butler’s discussion of ‘the prescriptive requirements whereby sexed or gendered bodies come into cultural intelligibility’ addresses in part the concept that non-binary gender does not have this cultural intelligibility, which includes (but is not limited to) non-binary gender being viewed as incomprehensible due to not conforming to these cisnormative ‘prescriptive requirements’.²⁹⁷ Albard’s question about Jumper, above, includes a question about language: is Jumper something ‘for which we need a new name?’.²⁹⁸ The existing language is inadequate for Jumper, the existing societal framework is inadequate to explain non-binary gender. Butler’s argument ‘that “persons” only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility’ exposes the way

²⁹⁵ Christina Richards and others, ‘Non-binary or genderqueer genders’, *International Review of Psychiatry*, 28.1 (2016), 95-102 (p. 96).

²⁹⁶ Nicholson, p. 3.

²⁹⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 203.

²⁹⁸ Nicholson, p. 3.

in which these non-binary characters are not considered intelligible.²⁹⁹ In the pre-2017 texts in particular, this unintelligibility is not framed as positive; rather its radical potential is disrupting, Othered, and to be rejected or avoided.

More generally, the association between non-binary gender and confusion – and non-binary characters being the source of confusion – is quite common. Non-binary fictional deities such as Sa and the Stranger are framed as beyond human comprehension – indeed, the Stranger is a direct representative of the unknown – and many more frightening characters such as Paolini’s High Priest or Jordan’s Myrddraal derive at least part of the fear they evoke from being difficult to comprehend.

Rational/Absurd

The fourth and final pair of attributes in this concept is rational/absurd, in which non-binary gender is framed as absurd in contrast to the supposedly rational cisgender. This builds on the other three pairs, and serves to demean and delegitimize non-binary gender and non-binary characters. Its manifestation in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature’s presentation of non-binary gender is varied, and intermittent. When non-binary characters are sympathetic or neutral, such as in the cases of Jumper and Sweets, they are able to be framed as absurd; however when they are intended to be monstrous or frightening, such as in the cases of the High Priest of Helgrind, Brett’s demons, or Jordan’s Myrddraal, this potential attribute cannot typically be found. This is, of course, unsurprising – it is likely that being framed as absurd would in many cases undermine the fear that these characters are intended to evoke and result in their being viewed as less of a threat to the protagonist/s. Absurdity is an excuse which allows a character to be dismissed as trivial or lesser, and is occasionally evoked in the

²⁹⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 22.

case of non-binary deities – usually when a character is rejecting them as real or meaningful, such as when Sa is dismissed by non-believers as ‘Sa, the god that fucks itself’³⁰⁰ and a would-be priest of Sa has his words dismissed as ‘priestly clap-trap’.³⁰¹

Characters who are neither frightening nor deities, such as Jumper and Sweets, are the clearest examples of this rational/absurd dynamic. Jumper is identified by Bowman (one of the book’s protagonists) as not belonging in a serious emotional moment; indeed, Bowman specifies that ‘he did not want a small round-faced man-woman making his departure look ridiculous’, drawing a clear connection between this perceived ridiculousness and Jumper’s gender.³⁰² And while Sweets’ character in ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’ is certainly involved in a serious situation, he/she is mostly only used by Martin as a source of information and a demonstration of the environment in which Tyrion has found himself in – Sweets’ own potential storyline is not given attention or serious treatment by the narrative. Although this pairing is not reflected by every non-binary character, it is nevertheless a significant element of the way in which the Othering of non-binary gender takes place in this context. Alongside real/unreal, consistent/inconsistent, and clear/confusing, this concept echoes the aspect of anti-non-binary rhetoric that declares, in Šporčič’s words, that ‘non-binary genders are some new-fangled gimmick or fad that is unlikely to last’.³⁰³ They are not framed as part of rational debate, but instead as trivial, temporary, and absurd, and this contributes to the minimisation and trivialisation of non-binary characters in fiction as well as non-binary gender more broadly.

³⁰⁰ Hobb, *Blood of Dragons*, p. 311.

³⁰¹ Hobb, *Ship of Magic*, p. 311.

³⁰² Nicholson, p. 206.

³⁰³ Šporčič, p. 64.

The Self/Other Pattern Going Forward

These four binary oppositions – real/unreal, consistent/inconsistent, clear/confusing, rational/absurd – are reoccurring elements of non-binary representation, framed as part of a cisgender/non-binary dynamic. This dynamic is of course just one binary among many, and does not account for everything – the cisgender/non-binary framing does not typically account for binary transgender people, for example, as they are either erased or permitted on the condition that they render themselves indistinguishable from cisgender people. But it is nevertheless a significant pattern found in the depiction of non-binary characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature, and one that only begins to be reframed and broken down with the 2017 examples of Sal and Tashi. Sal and Tashi’s texts both deal with at least some of these oppositions, but they are contextualised differently: now, they are subject to contestation, presented as the attitude of the villain or the ignorant. This shift reflects the continuing development of non-binary activism and non-binary rights in the ten to twenty years leading up to 2017 – as we saw in chapter one, pseudo-medieval fantasy tends to be reactive to cultural shifts rather than predictive or pre-emptive. The Othering of non-binary characters prior to 2017 is a combination of pronoun use, dehumanisation, and gender/anatomy conflation that is being gradually dismantled in newer texts.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have built on the chronology and discussion that I established in chapter one in order to analyse specific key elements of the Othering of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature. These elements are the choice of pronouns, the association of non-binary gender with non-human characters, and the conflation of gender with anatomy, all of which combine to build a Self/Other dynamic. Most of these non-binary characters do not clearly separate gender from anatomy, many use the pronoun *it*, few characters are human –

and few have their non-binary gender presented as a complex, legitimate, and unremarkable part of their identity. Their depiction is heavily intertwined with theories of Otherness and they are often framed in a negative light and in direct opposition to presumed cisgender normality and acceptability. Throughout the chapter I have returned to Butler’s concept of cultural unintelligibility. In the pre-2017 texts, in contrast to Butler’s framing of this unintelligibility as a force for radical change, the unintelligibility of the non-binary characters is part of the mechanism of their Othering. It is only in the later texts that this unintelligibility begins to be framed as a force of resistance and positive disruption – starting with Miller’s Sal, whose non-binary gender is interwoven with their opposition to their enemies.

Of the ten examples over the 1990-2017 period, seven are referred to as *it* at least once, and one is only ever referred to as *it* (Paolini’s High Priest). Four are not human, and one is only partly human; and in seven cases, their gender is conflated with their anatomy. Only two characters are clear protagonists and all the other examples positioned as guides or villains.

Table 3: Shared aspects of non-binary character depiction

Author	Character/s	Pronouns Used	Human	Gender/ Anatomy Conflated	Narrative Role
Jordan	Myrddraal	It, He	No	Yes	Villain
Martin	Stranger	It, He	No	Yes	Guide
Hobb	Sa	It, He, She	No	No	Guide
Nicholson	Jumper	It, He	Yes	Yes	Guide
<i>Britain</i>	<i>Mornhavon the Black</i>	<i>It, He</i>	<i>Partially</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Villain</i>
<i>Brett</i>	<i>Demons</i>	<i>It, He</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Villain</i>
Paolini	High Priest	It	Yes	Yes	Villain
Martin	Sweets	He, She	Yes	Yes	Guide
<i>Ember</i>	<i>Tashi</i>	<i>He, They</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Protagonist</i>
Miller	Sal	He, She, They	Yes	No	Protagonist

As noted in the previous chapter, non-binary representation is undergoing a shift over time, with protagonists and human characters appearing more predominantly in later texts. The language used to refer to them is also shifting, and Talbot, Atkinson, and Atkinson's argument that '[l]anguage changes, like other forms of social change, take place in the context of conflicting interests' is visible in this transitional period, as transgender and non-binary activism steadily gains legitimacy despite significant resistance.³⁰⁴

It is this earlier environment – one which is dismissive of the reality of non-binary gender and allows little in the way of representation – that Robin Hobb's 'Realm of the Elderlings' books emerge from, and more specifically, the character of Beloved, who will be the focus of the next two chapters of this thesis.

³⁰⁴ Talbot, Atkinson and Atkinson, p. 6.

Chapter Three: Emerging from Cisnormativity

In the first two chapters of this thesis I have examined the representation of non-binary gender in a range of pseudo-medieval fantasy literature texts, accommodating an understanding of the traits that these characters have in common as well as their relation to developments in transgender rights and the developing awareness of non-binary gender in western society (particularly the UK and the US). In chapters three and four, I will be focusing on one specific case study: the character Beloved from Robin Hobb's 'Realm of the Elderlings' series.

Robin Hobb's 'Realm of the Elderlings' series consists of sixteen books broken into four trilogies and a quartet, published from 1995 to 2017. For a brief summary of the series, please see Appendix B. Beloved appears in twelve of the sixteen books, and stands out from other non-binary characters in the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre in a number of ways; most notably, they are granted a level of character depth that is rarely seen in the genre, and not at all before the 2017 examples of Sal and Tashi. Beloved is known by a variety of names throughout the series – the Fool, Amber, and Lord Golden being some of the more frequently used – with Beloved as their oldest name (revealed in book seven, *Fool's Errand*). In order to keep confusion to a minimum, I will primarily refer to them as Beloved, and offer clarification where necessary.

In this chapter I argue that Beloved's depiction occupies a middle ground between the pre-2017 texts and the texts published in 2017 and onwards, with their Othering both present and disrupted in ways that echo and counter the depictions of non-binary gender discussed in chapter two. Ambiguity is central to Beloved's depiction, as 'Realm of the Elderlings'

presents the reader with a careful balance between obfuscation and clarity, certainty and mystery. This technique results in a character who partially emerges from the overwhelming cisnormativity of pseudo-medieval fantasy literature but does not achieve the centralised, focalizer position of 2017 examples such as Sal and Tashi. This chapter will first cover the ways in which ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ contextualises gender and queerness, and then discuss the association of non-binary gender with non-human characters, Beloved’s pronouns, and the handling of gender’s relation or lack thereof to anatomy.

Gender Norms and Queerness in ‘Realm of the Elderlings’

‘Realm of the Elderlings’ handles cultural norms of gender and sexuality in a nuanced manner which creates space for non-binary gender and allows Beloved to be depicted with a similar depth and complexity to the major cisgender characters. In chapter two, I discussed Butler’s concept of ‘those “incoherent” or “discontinuous” gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined’.³⁰⁵ In many of the pre-2017 examples, this concept is visible in the depiction of non-binary characters but in contrast to Butler’s framing as a positive, radical change it is used to Other the characters in question. However, in ‘Realm of the Elderlings’, this begins to change: the handling of cultural norms of gender and sexuality begins to allow for non-binary gender not only as the Other but as a positive alternative to cisnormativity that can radically alter understandings of gender. This is notably different from the other pre-2017 pseudo-medieval fantasy texts that I have discussed. There are two major aspects to address. Firstly, the spectrum of cultural gender norms depicted in ‘Realm of the Elderlings’, which includes a matriarchy, various different forms of patriarchy, and some with a more neutral approach to gender. Secondly, the depiction of non-heterosexual characters, which is rare

³⁰⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 23.

through the series until the ‘Rain Wild Chronicles’ features multiple homosexual characters in major roles.

Gender and Culture in ‘Realm of the Elderlings’

Across the series, ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ takes an active interest in gender dynamics, often presenting the reader with shifting or contrasting cultural norms that reveal the fundamentally constructed nature of gender. The series depicts several different cultural attitudes to gender, and dedicates a significant amount of time to exploring how these attitudes and cultures interact with and impact each other. Most notable is the violently patriarchal country of Chalced, whose women are not treated as full citizens; Chalced is also the centre of the slave trade, and serves as an antagonist in ‘The Rain Wild Chronicles’ as well as ‘The Liveship Traders’ and ‘Fitz and the Fool’ trilogies. Chalced’s impact on Jamaillia and, through Jamaillia, Bingtown (where much of the action takes place) is central to the plot of the ‘The Liveship Traders’ trilogy in particular.

Another demonstration of varied cultural attitudes to gender is centred in the ‘Tawny Man’ trilogy. The Six Duchies, the setting for the ‘Farseer’, ‘Tawny Man’, and (in part) the ‘Fitz and the Fool’ trilogies, is depicted as considerably less misogynistic or patriarchal than Chalced or the other southern countries. For example, when discussing the royal family, the reader is told that the Six Duchies does not practice male-preference primogeniture: *‘In some kingdoms and lands, it is the custom that male children will have precedence over female in matters of inheritance. Such has never been the case in the Six Duchies’* [italics in original].³⁰⁶ This supposed gender equality is, however, somewhat undercut by the lack of female children in the ruling family during the course of the series. In the ‘Tawny Man’

³⁰⁶ Robin Hobb, *Assassin’s Apprentice* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 88.

trilogy, the Six Duchies is then contrasted with the Outislands – a matriarchy, which follows matrilineal primogeniture. This contrast generates part of the plot, as a marriage alliance between the two countries must be arranged in such a way as to be acceptable to both cultures.

This contrast between different cultural attitudes to gender in one text has considerable precedents. In science fiction, texts such as Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* are well-known examples. Anna Gilarek argues that in these texts 'current problems are recontextualized, a technique which is meant to give the reader a new perspective on certain aspects of life they might otherwise take for granted, such as the inadequacies of patriarchy and women's marginality in society'.³⁰⁷ Gilarek is specifically discussing feminist dystopian science fiction, but the technique is not limited to those works. Feminist recontextualization is also found in fantasy literature, and in 'Realm of the Elderlings' is particularly central to the 'Liveship Traders' trilogy. The trilogy centres on cultural and social power, and who such power belongs to, depicting a colony fighting for its independence but also the emergence of resistance to growing misogyny. Bingtown begins as a colony of Jamailia, and has a distinctly egalitarian history; at the start of the trilogy, however, the influence of neighbouring Chalced has shifted them into something closer to a patriarchy, with women's power being subtly taken away. This shift is part of what prompts Bingtown's fight for independence, as well as being integral to several character arcs. This central focus allows the text to question cultural normativity around gender. By showing shifts in gender norms as both passive (the result of influence from a neighbouring culture) and active (conscious decision to fight to change that culture), 'Realm of the Elderlings' is

³⁰⁷ Anna Gilarek, 'Marginalization of 'the Other': Gender Discrimination in Dystopian Visions by Feminist Science Fiction Authors', *Text Matters*, 2.2 (2012), 221-238, (p. 222).

able to demonstrate that cultural gender norms are not fixed, and that there are multiple possibilities and different approaches. Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun discusses this as part of a comparative analysis of Hobb and George R. R. Martin's depiction of rape in their respective fantasy series, arguing that '[t]he Liveship Traders examines the opportunities available to women within patriarchal social structures at the moment when these structures begin to shake'.³⁰⁸ The shakiness is revealing; Borowska-Szerszun links this to Butler's concept of performative gender, and I would argue it also demonstrates Butler's point that '[f]or gender to be a norm suggests that it is always and only tenuously embodied by any particular social actor'.³⁰⁹ The cultural gender norms embodied in 'Realm of the Elderlings' are indeed, tenuous, with the whole of Bingtown's positioning of women shifting over the course of the 'Liveship Traders' trilogy and in doing so giving way to opportunities for women – opportunities to change, to take power in different ways, to change their self-expression. This shift in gender norms also potentially allows opportunities for the emergence of those 'who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined'.³¹⁰ The positive framing of the cultural shift to greater egalitarianism encourages a failure of gendered norms, dismantling patriarchy and thereby also potentially disrupting its interlinked hetero- and cisnormativity.

While this effect is particularly distinct in the 'Liveship Traders' trilogy, the interlinked nature of the four trilogies and quartet that make up 'Realm of the Elderlings' allows its impact to also be felt across other parts of the series. As discussed below, following the events of 'Liveship Traders' we are given a quartet which centres queer characters, and

³⁰⁸ Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun, 'Representation of Rape in George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire and Robin Hobb's Liveship Traders', *Extrapolation*, 60.1 (2019), 1-22 (p. 11) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.3828/extr.2019.2>>.

³⁰⁹ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 41.

³¹⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 23.

Chalced's violent misogyny is a driving force for the plot of the 'Fitz and the Fool' trilogy which concludes the series. Hobb does not merely place differing gender norms beside one another on a fantasy map – instead, these cultures interact and influence one another, exposing the performative nature of gender and the instability of gender norms. This results in a text which creates space for non-binary gender, setting the stage for Beloved in particular to be granted both depth and validity. Unlike the Othering-focused framing of previously discussed pre-2017 non-binary characters, Beloved's framing as culturally unintelligible is given the opportunity to be considered a positive, radical option.

Queerness in 'Realm of the Elderlings'

In addition to this focus on differing cultural norms around gender, 'Realm of the Elderlings' also includes a broader depiction of sexuality than the exclusive or near-exclusive heterosexuality of many of the pre-2017 texts discussed in the previous two chapters. This broader range also contributes to a textual context that allows more space for a non-binary character to be depicted without being primarily Othered. In many of the pre-2017 examples of non-binary characters, the non-binary character in question is either the only queer character in the text (Nicholson's Jumper, Paolini's High Priest of Helgrind), or shares the text only with other queer characters whose roles are very minor (Martin's Sweets, Martin's the Stranger, Britain's Mornhavon the Black). In the 2017-18 'Mask of Shadows' duology, by contrast, Sal is granted a queer community to participate in, with several other prominent queer characters. 'Realm of the Elderlings' falls somewhere between the typical pre-2017 texts and those that follow them.

In the first three sections of the series that feature Beloved (that is, everything except the 'Rain Wild Chronicles' and the 'Fitz and the Fool' trilogy), Beloved is the most prominent

and explicitly queer character. There are queer readings of more major characters – Peter Melville’s paper, ‘Queerness and Homophobia in Robin Hobb’s Farseer Trilogies’, for example, questions Fitz’s heterosexuality at length and reframes him as being part of a narrative that codes queerness ‘not explicitly in terms of queer sexuality but in terms of a “substitute alterity,” which is to say, Fitz’s inclination toward a culturally condemned form of magic’.³¹¹ Certainly there is a great deal to analyse in terms of parallels to queerness and homophobia in ‘Realm of the Elderlings’; however, while these characters are queer-coded, their queerness is purely subtextual, and thus it is out of scope for this thesis. In the ‘Rain Wild Chronicles’, however, several queer men take leading roles in the narrative. Sedric is the most prominent of these, with his point of view narrative appearing in thirty chapters, followed by his abusive partner Hest (point of view present in eleven chapters), and new romantic interest Carson (point of view present in one chapter). Due to their significance to leading character Sedric, both Hest and Carson have important narrative roles in addition to their point of view sections throughout the text. This newly-expanded queer cast (which also includes a handful of more minor queer male characters) allows for the depiction of the concept of queer community, something that I have discussed in light of Linsey Miller’s ‘Mask of Shadows’ duology in chapter one of this thesis. While the limitations of this thesis are such that I cannot expand on the queer characters of ‘Rain Wild Chronicles’ in great detail, I will discuss the significance of their presence and how it impacts the depiction of Beloved and queer community.

The central impact of the inclusion of multiple queer characters is that it demonstrates possibility and variance. Instead of having a sole character represent queerness (and therefore, any traits that character has becoming entangled with queerness in the text – see the

³¹¹ Melville, p. 284.

discussions of the monstrous in chapters one and two), there are three main characters and at least three minor characters, all of whom have different personalities. This variety allows for queerness to stand as its own trait, no longer entirely entangled with the traits of the singular queer person. For example, if the abusive character Hest was the only queer character, the text would have created an association between queerness and abusive behaviour; however, as the text also presents us with the kind Carson and the uncertain Sedric, this association is disrupted. The depiction of queerness, then, gains multiple facets, without being reduced to one overly simplistic stereotype.

Depicting a singular queer character, usually from a non-queer perspective, emphasises the ways in which that character is viewed as an Other – and the non-queer perspective on them can deny their queerness legitimacy or respect. When depicting a queer community, the perspectives of multiple queer characters on each other can be included. This can allow more room for questioning a cis- or heteronormative viewpoint, and it can also emphasise the validity of queer experience and existence. Eleanor Formby, in her research on the way that LGBT+ communities function, states that ‘[f]or many people [...] community was viewed as a source of affirmation and identity validation because it was frequently understood to involve finding people who were (assumed to be) “like them”.’³¹² This affirmation/validation is also demonstrated in fictional depictions of community. Linsey Miller’s ‘Mask of Shadows’ duology is a particularly clear example, in which Sal forms bonds with other queer characters that grant them confidence and reassurance. The presence of multiple queer characters, even if some are isolated, can also demonstrate the potential for affirmation/validation even if it does not fully appear. The presence of a queer community in a text indicates to the reader that the isolated queer character (such as Beloved) could

³¹² Formby, p. 184.

potentially belong in this fictional universe, disrupting the Othering they might otherwise be entangled with.

The depiction of the queer characters in ‘Rain Wild Chronicles’ is quite separate from the depiction of Beloved, as Beloved does not appear in ‘Rain Wild Chronicles’ and when the characters do appear in the same books (the ‘Fitz and the Fool’ trilogy) they barely interact with one another on the page. Beloved does not have a queer community in the same way that Sal does in the ‘Mask of Shadows’ duology – for most of the series Beloved is, much like other non-binary characters in pre-2017 pseudo-medieval fantasy, distinctly alone. However, unlike the other pre-2017 examples, ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ demonstrates that queerness exists in its fictional universe in a multi-faceted and complex manner, which contextualises Beloved’s queerness as one possibility among many rather than a lone Othered outlier.

Towards the end of ‘Realm of the Elderlings’, Beloved finally connects with another queer character in the form of Ash/Spark, a character who presented male as a child for personal safety reasons and now presents as male or female in different contexts. While this supporting character’s potentially non-binary gender is not given the same amount of discussion and focus as Beloved’s, it is significant for the way his/her presence adds to the queer community in the text. With the addition of Ash/Spark, non-binary gender is no longer solely granted to Beloved. This, much like the use of multiple queer characters in the ‘Rain Wild Chronicles’, allows for a degree of additional nuance. In any text with a singular non-binary character, all of that character’s singular traits are fundamentally associated with non-binary gender – if they are also the only non-human, it implies non-binary gender is a non-human trait, for example. However with more than one non-binary character, each of whom has their own individual traits, the connection between the traits and non-binary gender is

disrupted. Butler's concept of people 'who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined', which many non-binary characters evoke, is once more able to be framed as a neutral or even positive aspect rather than a mechanism for Othering as seen in other pre-2017 texts.³¹³

While depictions of non-binary characters as part of a queer community in pseudo-medieval fantasy are rare to non-existent in the pre-2017 period, this changes with the publication of Linsey Miller's *Mask of Shadows* in 2017. 'Realm of the Elderlings' does not directly depict Beloved engaged with a broader queer community, but the presence of the queer men in the 'Rain Wild Chronicles' and the later introduction of Ash/Spark allows the text to occupy a middle ground between the absence of the queer community in pre-2017 texts and the significance of queer community in later texts. This and the depiction of the complexity and fundamental instability of cultural gender norms in the series both contribute to positioning Beloved as a non-binary character beginning to emerge from the overwhelming cisnormativity and sparse queerness of pre-2017 pseudo-medieval fantasy. This in turn contextualises Beloved and creates space for their non-binary gender to be treated as a positive and complex aspect of their character, and decreases the Othering in their depiction.

Beloved: Literal Humanity/Inhumanity

In chapter two of this thesis, I discussed the ways in which the literal inhumanity of many non-binary characters impacts the depiction of their gender – specifically, the way that non-binary gender is typically framed as a non-human trait. Anamarija Šporčič, in her discussion of the often alien non-binary characters in science fiction, argues that 'when they come accompanied by the baggage of playing the Other to the human race, the message to a non-

³¹³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 23.

binary readership can only be bittersweet, as the non-binary characters in science fiction, despite apparent representation and visibility, are often unable to fully serve as sources of empowerment for anyone wishing to identify with them'.³¹⁴ This effect is also visible in pseudo-medieval fantasy's pre-2017 trend of limiting non-binary gender to non-human characters, particular in combination with the depictions of non-binary as monstrous (Myrddraal, High Priest of Helgrind). Beloved occupies a middle ground between the pre-2017 and 2017-onwards texts, this time in a particularly literal fashion: Beloved is *partially* human, held between the common inhumanity of many pre-2017 examples and the humanity of later characters like Sal and Tashi. Throughout 'Realm of the Elderlings' Beloved's human and non-human aspects are depicted in ways which complicate the non-binary/non-human association that I discussed in chapter two, without fully escaping it.

A descendent of both humans and the barely described Whites, very little information is given in the series about the non-human aspect of Beloved's heritage. Whites are referred to as distinct from humans – for example, one of the major villains of the final trilogy refers to another character as 'neither human nor White!' as a point of disparagement.³¹⁵ Aside from this distinction, little is made clear. The only facts that are available are that their colouring (of hair, skin, and eyes) shifts from white through gold to almost black over the course of their lifetime; that they live much longer than humans; and that they have the gift of prophecy. The most direct claim of Beloved's divergence from humanity is entangled with a significant point in Fitz's acceptance of their gender. While healing Beloved with magic, Fitz remarks that Beloved 'was human only in the same way that I was a wolf', implying some general similarities but also some strong differences, and refusing to specify what those

³¹⁴ Šporčič, p. 64.

³¹⁵ Robin Hobb, *Assassin's Fate* (London: HarperCollins, 2017), p. 325.

differences are.³¹⁶ This disrupts anatomy-based definitions of Beloved's gender; but it also emphasises Beloved's partly non-human nature in order to do so. This echoes the pattern of non-human non-binary characters whose lack of humanity is tied specifically to their non-binary gender. Butler discusses gender as one of 'the conditions of intelligibility by which the human emerges, by which the human is recognized', and without a gender that fits into a cisnormative model, these characters become unintelligible as human.³¹⁷ This builds a pattern of association between non-binary and non-human, in which non-binary gender cannot just be used to indicate a possibly non-human nature, but also be framed as exclusively non-human. If Beloved's non-binary gender is an aspect of their non-human nature, this follows that pattern.

In contrast to the other non-human non-binary characters of the pre-2017 text, however, the connection between non-binary gender and Beloved's non-human aspect is granted much greater complexity. Firstly, it is emphasised in 'Realm of the Elderlings' that as much as Beloved is partially non-human, they are also partially human. Beloved's human aspect is the aspect that is more publicly known, with knowledge of their non-human heritage kept to Fitz and one or two others. While their non-human heritage is noted occasionally, as cited above, it is ignored and unacknowledged for the vast majority of the text with most characters (including Fitz) treating Beloved as human. Beloved may be only partially human, but it is their human aspect that the narrative centres. This distinguishes them from other pre-2017 examples of non-human non-binary characters, and loosens the connection between their non-human aspect (rarely mentioned) and non-binary gender (regularly reiterated, particularly as the series progresses).

³¹⁶ Robin Hobb, *Fool's Fate* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 634.

³¹⁷ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 57.

We also have the emergence of other part-human part-White characters, none of whom are non-binary. Throughout the first six books (the ‘Farseer’ and ‘Liveship Traders’ trilogies), Beloved is both the only non-binary character (except the bigender deity Sa, whose role is minimal and who never appears in person), and the only part-human, part-White character. Towards the end of the ‘Tawny Man’ trilogy, this changes. Two more characters with part-human, part-White heritage are introduced: Prilkop (ally) and the Pale Woman (major antagonist), male and female respectively. Neither Prilkop or the Pale Woman are depicted as non-binary, which indicates that non-binary gender is a characteristic specific to Beloved rather than a trait common to all those with partial-White heritage. There is also the appearance of Ash/Spark in the ‘Fitz and the Fool’ trilogy, who is fully human but also interpretable as non-binary. This is raised when Perseverance, a friend of Ash/Spark, questions Fitz on the subject:

‘So that’s who she really is? A girl named Spark?’

That was a harder question. ‘Spark is whoever she is. Sometimes that’s Ash. It’s like being a father and a son and perhaps a husband. All different facets of the same person.’

He [Perseverance] nodded. ‘But it was easier to talk to Ash. We had better jokes.’³¹⁸

This has the same impact as not depicting Prilkop or the Pale Woman as non-binary, but approaching the issue, as it were, from the opposite direction. The presence of Prilkop, the Pale Woman, and Ash/Spark disrupts the association between the non-binary and the non-human – being partly non-human is no longer the exclusive source of non-binary gender, as humans can also be non-binary, and being non-binary is not the defining trait of being partially White, as other partially White characters are not non-binary. As discussed earlier in this thesis, Stephen Whittle argues that in cisnormativity ‘[h]aving a sex is apparently both a

³¹⁸ Hobb, *Assassin’s Fate*, p. 76.

prior determinant of being human’, and this requirement is often expanded to include gender (and following that, one of only two acceptable genders).³¹⁹ This concept is common in pre-2017 pseudo-medieval fantasy, but Beloved’s depiction as well as the presence of other more minor characters over the course of the ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ series distinguishes the series from its contemporaries in the genre. Notably, while Ash/Spark appears in the previous two books of the series, making their first appearance in 2014, the above quote is the clearest explication of their gender and it appears in *Assassin’s Fate*, published in 2017 – this matches the shift in the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre at around this time to accounting for more non-binary characters as well as more sophisticated depictions of non-binary gender, a shift which itself reflects the development of public awareness and growing acceptance of non-binary gender discussed in the introduction to this thesis.

Overall, the depiction of Beloved and their non-binary gender and its relation to their literally partial humanity most closely resembles that of the majority of the human non-binary characters – Jumper, Sweets, Sal, and Tashi, though not Paolini’s High Priest – despite Beloved technically being only partly human. It is clear that Beloved’s depiction occupies a middle ground between the pre-2017 characters (whose humanity is infrequently literal and often accompanied by figurative dehumanisation) and 2017-onwards depictions (which centre the non-binary characters and present them as fully human). Beloved’s human and non-human aspects are depicted with complexity, with their non-human aspect sometimes seeming to be associated with their non-binary gender but with their human aspect and distinct non-binary gender given more emphasis. This results in a non-binary character who is in the process of emerging from the cisnormativity and Othering of pseudo-medieval fantasy literature without fully escaping it.

³¹⁹ Whittle, ‘Foreword’, p. xiii.

Beloved: Pronouns

The predominate use of *he* for Beloved raises questions that reflect the complexity of language around non-binary gender. It both undermines Beloved's depiction (delegitimising their identity) and simultaneously provides the foundation for the shift to multiple pronouns later in the series. This shift is part of the way in which the slow dismantling of the cisnormative perspective across the series, discussed in chapter four, reframes Beloved as emerging from cisnormativity.

Beloved is not referred to as *it* at all in 'Realm of the Elderlings', already an indicator of the different treatment of this character from a number of the previous examples. The pronoun used most frequently to refer to Beloved is *he*, with *she* used less frequently. This usage complicates the depiction of Beloved as non-binary. While, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, non-binary people do use *he* and/or *she*, the usage of this to refer to Beloved originates external to them. Beloved never expresses a particular pronoun preference – all pronouns used for Beloved are selected by other characters, usually based on how Beloved's gender presentation is being interpreted.

It is possible that the use of *he* to refer to Beloved is intended to be neutral and therefore to allow for rather than deny Beloved's non-binary gender; however, the power of *he* to imply that masculine in fact *is* the neutral should not be ignored. Kiesling's argument that men 'are the default human category in language, in society, and even in most studies of language and gender' is visible in the way that *he* can be seen as neutral where *she* is not, while simultaneously revealing a male dominance to society and language.³²⁰ This neutrality or lack

³²⁰ Kiesling, p. 655.

thereof has been examined in other genres, such as in science fiction – Ursula Le Guin’s 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* features an entire planet populated by people who have no fixed sex or gender, and uses *he* as the default pronoun. Le Guin defended this choice in a 1976 essay, ‘Is Gender Necessary?’ but returned to it in 1988 (‘Is Gender Necessary? Redux’) with a different stance, presented as notes on the original essay. The 1976 essay argues that:

But the central failure [...] that the Gethenians seem like *men*, instead of menwomen. This rises in part from the choice of pronoun. [...] “He” is the generic pronoun, damn it, in English [...] The pronouns wouldn’t matter at all if I had been cleverer at *showing* the “female” component of the Gethenian characters in *action*.³²¹

The 1988 notes on that section counters this with the following:

[...] the so-called generic pronoun he/him/his, which does in fact exclude women from discourse; and which was an invention of male grammarians, for until the sixteenth century the English generic singular pronoun was they/them/their, as it still is in English and American colloquial speech. It should be restored to the written language, and let the pedants and pundits squeak and gibber in the streets.³²²

Le Guin’s strong advocacy in these notes for acceptance of *they* as a neutral pronoun is followed by one noting ‘how the pronouns I used shaped, directed, controlled my own thinking’, something absolutely applicable to interpretations of Beloved’s gender via their pronouns.³²³ Beloved is known as the Fool in the first three books of the series (the ‘Farseer’ trilogy) and referred to almost exclusively by what Le Guin calls ‘the so-called generic pronoun’: *he*.³²⁴ While this could theoretically be held as neutral, its actual impact is to anchor a presumption of the Fool’s masculinity – particularly in the viewpoint character, Fitz. While there are moments in which some queering of gender is indicated (discussed at length

³²¹ Guin, *Dreams Must Explain Themselves*, p. 43.

³²² Guin, *Dreams Must Explain Themselves*, p. 43.

³²³ Guin, *Dreams Must Explain Themselves*, p. 43.

³²⁴ Guin, *Dreams Must Explain Themselves*, p. 43.

in the next section), Fitz does not consider any options beyond Beloved being male, and this is emphasised by his distress in *Assassin's Quest* (book three) when another character (Starling) states that '[t]he Fool [Beloved] is a woman, and she is in love with you' and continues to refer to Beloved with the pronoun *she*.³²⁵ Fitz calls this 'a ridiculous idea' and rejects it entirely.³²⁶ While the distinction between the older Fitz narrating and the younger Fitz speaking (a form of diegetic/extradiegetic perspective contrast discussed in chapter four of this thesis) allows for this incident to impact the reader's possible interpretation of Beloved's gender without changing Fitz's, it is not the pronoun *he* that is allowing any room for neutrality. Indeed, peace between Fitz and Starling returns with the following as part of the apology: 'And I will stop calling the Fool [Beloved] "she". Whatever I may suspect'.³²⁷ As *they* is not ever considered an option in the 'Realm of the Elderlings' series, this indicates a return to *he* and the implied maleness thereof.

In the 'Liveship Traders' trilogy (books four, five, and six), Beloved appears only as Amber, and is referred to exclusively as *she*. In the 'Tawny Man' trilogy (books seven, eight, and nine), Beloved's Lord Golden persona is introduced, and while Lord Golden and Beloved/the Fool are consistently referred to as *he*, the Amber persona also makes an appearance. When Fitz first encounters Amber (as he is not present for the events of the 'Liveship Traders' trilogy) it is while overhearing her conversation with another character. In Fitz's description of this, he notably avoids using the pronoun *she* entirely. Fitz's discomfort with Beloved's non-binary gender is dealt with in more detail in chapter four of this thesis; for now, it is enough to note that Fitz does continue to refer to Beloved as *he* all the way to the end of the 'Tawny Man' trilogy. Although this is possibly attributable to interpret as a use of *he* as

³²⁵ Robin Hobb, *Assassin's Quest* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 551.

³²⁶ Hobb, *Assassin's Quest*, p. 551.

³²⁷ Hobb, *Assassin's Quest*, p. 646.

neutral, it nonetheless has the effect of slightly stifling the presentation of Beloved as non-binary in this otherwise powerful section.

The final trilogy – the ‘Fitz and the Fool’ trilogy, consisting of *Fool’s Assassin*, *Fool’s Quest*, and *Assassin’s Fate* – returns to Fitz and Beloved as characters, and uses a mix of pronouns for Beloved as they shift through different personas, but begins by predominantly using *he*. In the final trilogy, Fitz and Beloved encounter a number of characters from the ‘Liveship Traders’ trilogy who only know Beloved as Amber and have never met Fitz. Beloved spends much of the journey as Amber, this time in Fitz’s presence – and for the first time in the series, Fitz changes the pronoun he uses for Beloved from *he* to *she*. Initially, *he* sticks, both in Fitz’s narration and the speech of the other characters, one of whom describes Beloved’s arrival at camp:

‘He helped them to stand, and Ash said right away, “Help my master. Is he all right?” So then we helped the other one to stand, and it was a woman. Then I looked again, and it was the Fool [...] both were dressed as women.’³²⁸

When both Beloved/Ash return, Beloved’s manner as well as their mode of dress ‘was feminine’, though Fitz continues to use the pronoun *he*.³²⁹ The pronoun *she* first appears several pages later, when Ash/Spark is relating their activities and refers to Beloved as *Lady Amber*:

‘I screamed and seized Lady Amber and dragged him away from the bucket. I could scarcely see where I was running, but run we did. Not that he was happy about it.’
‘Lady Amber?’ Lant asked, confused.
Spark caught her lip between her teeth. ‘So he – no, so she told me I must think of her, guised as we are.’³³⁰

³²⁸ Robin Hobb, *Fool’s Quest* (London: HarperCollins, 2015), p. 654.

³²⁹ Hobb, *Fool’s Quest*, p. 663.

³³⁰ Hobb, *Fool’s Quest*, p. 674.

This shift in pronouns is explained as having originated in a direct request from Beloved, and one that Ash/Spark is imperfectly attempting to abide by – correcting him/herself, for example, for using *he*, but not always noticing. Beloved is, as always, positioned as the source and expert in this area; Fitz, unusually, makes no comment. This framing at this stage in the narrative continues the prioritisation of self-identification over external categorisation, even in the face of Fitz’s steady use of *he* – which is about to change for the very first time. Fitz and the two young men accompanying him, Perseverance and Lant, are separated from Beloved and Ash/Spark and then reunite:

‘Behind her came, not the Fool, not Grey, but Amber, and Amber as I had never even imagined her. The butterfly cloak hung gracefully from her narrow shoulders. The Fool’s short hair had been damped and tousled into curls, and a touch of paint reddened his pale lips and cheeks. I knew the sparkling earrings were glass, but the sparkle was as convincing as the Fool’s painted mouth and black-lined eyes. My boyhood friend had vanished and there was absolutely nothing of King Shrewd’s jester.’³³¹

As in the previous quote, there is a juxtaposition of pronouns and personae here. Amber is granted the pronoun *she* but Fitz quickly undercuts this by framing his description of Amber as almost a disguise, underneath which is the Fool (and the corresponding *he* pronoun): it is ‘*her* narrow shoulders’ but ‘*his* pale lips and cheeks’ (emphasis mine).³³² The aspects of Beloved’s presentation that Fitz identifies as feminine in this short passage are also largely artificial, suggesting a framing of Beloved-as-male as some kind of hidden truth beneath a “female” appearance. This is a particularly noteworthy point at which the possible use of *he* as neutral is distinctly unsuccessful – even with all the history of the character’s presentation, it is hard not to view this description as a rejection of any genuine femininity on Beloved’s part.

³³¹ Hobb, *Fool’s Quest*, p. 699.

³³² Hobb, *Fool’s Quest*, p. 699.

This shifting between pronouns and names continues through the scene and the scenes immediately after it, with *Amber* and *the Fool* and even *Lord Golden* appearing in Fitz's narration at different points. The impact is much the same as Fitz does continue to default to *he* and *the Fool*; however in the following chapter, there is a distinct shift. Fitz's narration finally relaxes into the use of *she*, accompanying his statement of acceptance that I discussed in the above section on names and naming: 'She [Beloved] seemed to feel me looking at her'.³³³ It is important to note that it has taken the better part of fifteen books (eight of which contain Fitz's narrative perspective) as well as a shift in the way Beloved presents to Fitz in order to reach a point where Fitz's narrative is willing to accept *she* as also being a valid pronoun for Beloved. This delay links back to the way in which pre-2017 non-binary characters are often buried in the depths of a narrative, something that I discussed in the introduction to this thesis. Jumper, for example, only appears in the third book of a trilogy; Sweets has a small part in book five of a projected seven; the High Priest of Helgrind does not appear until the second two books of a quartet. We do not see a change in this pattern until the release of Linsey Miller's 2017 *Mask of Shadows*, in which the non-binary character is not only the lead but also referred to as genderfluid in the book's promotional material. In 'Realm of the Elderlings', this delay is tied to the reluctance of the narrating character – Fitz's slow shift in stance towards Beloved's non-binary gender is something that I address in detail in chapter four. The pronoun use becomes a marker of this shift in stance, indicating more about the narrating perspective than about Beloved's gender. It also reflects changes in visibility for non-binary gender – the series began in 1995, and ended in 2017. This period saw a rise in transgender activism and public awareness of non-binary gender, and the shift in the depiction of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature echoed that with

³³³ Hobb, *Fool's Quest*, p. 721.

Mask of Shadows as a 2017 turning point. The eventual acceptance of more than one pronoun for Beloved in ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ comes in 2015, just two years before, positioning the series at a turning point in non-binary representation in the genre.

The use of *he* as Beloved’s primary pronoun for much of ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ complicates their depiction as non-binary, positioning them once more between the dehumanised and Othered pre-2017 examples and the centralised characters from 2017-onwards. *He* as a neutral pronoun has declined in use over the twentieth century, but remains present.³³⁴ In this context it frames Beloved as mired in but beginning to emerge from cisnormativity.

Beloved: Gender /Anatomy Conflation

Ambiguity is key to the depiction of Beloved’s non-binary gender in ‘Realm of the Elderlings’. Ambiguity is used to navigate cisnormativity, disrupting it and creating space for non-binary gender without being entirely beholden to the Othering seen in other pre-2017 pseudo-medieval fantasy texts. Equally, however, it allows for more obfuscation than seen in later texts – directly confronting Beloved’s non-binary gender can be evaded in ways not possible for characters like Sal.

The conflation of gender and anatomy in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature is something that I discussed in chapter two, addressing its persistence as a trend, its detrimental effect on the depiction of non-binary gender, and its roots in both traditional gender roles and in a perceived connection between the body and identity. These issues are all visible in the

³³⁴ Anne Pauwels, ‘Linguistic Sexism and Feminist Linguistic Activism’, in *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, ed. by Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 550-570 (pp. 563-5).

‘Realm of the Elderlings’ series, with many of them brought into particular relief by the depiction of Beloved; however, ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ does not conform cleanly to the trend of gender/anatomy conflation. Halberstam’s discussion of ‘what kinds of truth about gender we demand from the lives of people who pass, cross-dress, or simply refuse normative gender categories’ is pertinent here, as Beloved must navigate a cisnormative environment that continues to demand a perceived truth in the form of anatomical information.³³⁵ At several points through the series, viewpoint character Fitz directly demands kind of “truth” from Beloved on the subject of gender. While he does not ask explicitly about anatomy, he does not need to – in the cisnormative culture he exists in and perpetuates, gender and anatomy are conflated to the extent that to ask about one is to ask about the other. Fitz does not question his own understanding of gender and its cisnormative framing, demonstrating the way in which cisnormativity perpetuates itself. Butler describes the mechanism behind this as follows:

Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction “compels” our belief in its necessity and naturalness.³³⁶

The so-called truth of gender – in a cisnormative frame, the idea that gender and anatomy are directly related to one another in a specific and predictable manner – is the basis for Fitz’s understanding or lack thereof when dealing with Beloved, as Beloved steadily disrupts it. Throughout the series, the treatment of the relationship between gender and anatomy in the depiction of Beloved focuses on self-identification and discretion, becoming gradually more nuanced. In Beloved’s depiction there is a blend of anatomical facts which are second or

³³⁵ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, p. 48.

³³⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 190.

third-hand, or based on cisnormative assumptions, with the concealment of more direct evidence. The viewpoint characters for the series are cisgender, and their societies cisnormative, and so Beloved is often navigating the perceptions other characters have of them in different ways depending on the circumstances. Beloved is given a surprising amount of power to influence and even control their presentation and the information given about their gender and anatomy in contrast with other pre-2017 characters. This includes the use of humour, an emphasis on privacy, and choices of dress and presentation. Central to this is the careful use of ambiguity, created by presenting both information that implies one concept and information that obfuscates that concept, often in close proximity to one another.

The Prioritising of Ambiguity

Ambiguity is a key aspect of Beloved's depiction as non-binary. It is significant that the destabilisation of a cisgender reading of Beloved is evoked without resorting to actual facts about their anatomy. Unlike George R. R. Martin's Sweets, who 'lifted her skirts and showed them what was underneath' in his/her introductory scene and whose anatomy is intrinsically conflated with his/her gender identity, the moments in which details of Beloved's anatomy could have been revealed are passed over with very little fuss.³³⁷ This could be interpreted as an association between gender and anatomy in and of itself – in the sense that if Beloved's gender is a mystery then their anatomy must be likewise, and vice versa. Halberstam's 'kinds of truth about gender we demand from the lives of people who [...] refuse normative gender categories' appear here, in that when the non-binary character cannot be resolved into a cisgender character, their anatomy must at least follow the cisnormative principle of being something which reveals the so-called truth of a gender.³³⁸ Pairing non-binary gender with a

³³⁷ George R. R. Martin, *A Dance With Dragons Part One: Dreams and Dust* (London: Voyager Books, 2011), p. 106.

³³⁸ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, p. 48.

lack of anatomy in some way occurs in several other non-binary characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature – Hobb’s Sa and Martin’s Stranger are both deities whose physical form (if indeed they have one) is never seen; Jumper’s physical form (or other characters’ perception of his physical form, it is unclear) shifts magically and this itself is the indication of his shifting, non-binary gender. Throughout ‘Realm of the Elderlings’, the text refuses to provide anatomical information that would inevitably become entangled with how Beloved’s gender is viewed and preserves a degree of “ambiguity”. I use “ambiguity” in scare quotes here in order to emphasise that truly, if the emphasis on self-identification that is prioritised by the transgender and non-binary community is to be followed, by this stage in the narrative there is little to no ambiguity regarding Beloved’s non-binary gender. Beloved has stated that all aspects of them, all personae, are true and real – they are, then, a person who cannot be defined by the terms of binary gender. We see this most prominently in the quarrel between Fitz and Beloved, and in the healing of Beloved, both from the ‘Tawny Man’ trilogy. In their argument in *The Golden Fool*, Beloved is able to insist on an all-personae-encompassing, multi-gender identity without ever having to evidence or otherwise mention their anatomy:

You know more of the whole of me than any other person who breathes, yet you persist in insisting that all of that cannot be me. What would you have me cut off and leave behind? And why must I truncate myself in order to please you? I would never ask that of you.³³⁹

In healing Beloved in the following book, Fitz develops a regard and respect for Beloved’s full identity that only potentially existed before: ‘I realized and accepted him as he was’.³⁴⁰ Beloved’s self-identification as non-binary is hardly ambiguous or mysterious by this point in the series, which does not match the ambiguity created around their anatomy. Instead, I

³³⁹ Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 403-404.

³⁴⁰ Hobb, *Fool’s Fate*, p. 634.

would argue that this ambiguity indicates an awareness of the power of this conflation: by keeping the details of Beloved's anatomy from the reader, the text is preventing the reader from being able to misgender Beloved based upon that anatomy. All that remains is the interpretations of other characters (often contradictory and frequently undermined) and Beloved's own words. This remaining ambiguity is used to protect the revelation of Beloved's non-binary gender from both the cisnormative strictures of the fictional world that they inhabit and the potential cisnormative readings of their character.

There are two aspects of Beloved's depiction with which ambiguity is used in order to play with the idea of truth: information about anatomy, and the opinions of other characters.

Information: The Undermining of Anatomical Presumption

At no point in 'Realm of the Elderlings' is the reader given a direct description of Beloved's genitalia or chest area, the two most strongly gendered areas of the body in a cisnormative system. All the information given is presented indirectly, via another character's perspective, or only implied. The impact of this is to undermine the certainty of these supposed facts, contributing to the overall ambiguity and obfuscation used in Beloved's depiction. This information can be grouped into roughly four categories – information that indicates cisgender female anatomy, information that indicates cisgender male anatomy, information that indicates something that fits into neither category, and deliberate obfuscation of information that could be used to gender Beloved according to a cisnormative standard.

Indicators of cisgender female anatomy that are given for Beloved are few, and only appear in the 'Liveships Traders' trilogy – in this trilogy, Beloved appears only as Amber, and is

unquestioningly read as female by the other characters. It is revealed that Althea's ability to successfully disguise herself as a man is based on what she learned from Beloved:

Amber had also shown her how to wrap her breasts flat to her chest in such a way that the binding cloth appeared to be no more than another shirt worn under her outer shirt. Amber had shown her how to fold dark-coloured stockings to use as blood rags.³⁴¹

The practical advice about breast-binding and menstruation is not something that Beloved would be required to have learned from personal experience – however, the personal nature of the information, especially given common cultural taboos around discussing menstruation, does imply personal knowledge. The inclusion of this exchange contributes to the presentation of Beloved as someone with anatomy typically classified as female by a cisnormative framework. Simultaneously, it leaves much unspecified about the source of the knowledge, allowing space for other interpretations.

Indicators of cisgender male anatomy are slightly more common in the narrative, but are once more presented in ways that evade absolute confirmation. In the 'Fitz and the Fool' trilogy, it is rumoured that Beloved has a son, somewhere out in the world – as Beloved was not aware of this before, the deduction made by other characters is that Beloved is cisgender male (as they find it unlikely that Beloved would forget childbirth). However, this rumour is resolved using a magical solution rather than a biological one – Beloved's so-called son actually results from Fitz and Beloved's magical bonding in an earlier book. Once again, a matter that is on the surface a way of revealing the perceived truth of Beloved's gender (in the context of a cisnormative gender/anatomy conflation) is expanded to preserve ambiguity.

³⁴¹ Hobb, *Ship of Magic*, p. 394.

A more complex contribution to the gender/anatomy concept is found in the depiction of the Pale Woman, a major antagonist. The Pale Woman is of a similar line of descent as Beloved, and they are very similar in physical appearance: ‘she mirrored the Fool in appearance’,³⁴² ‘[l]ike the Fool, she was long-limbed and limber-waisted’,³⁴³ and ‘[h]er face was his’.³⁴⁴ The only major physical distinctions made between the two of them are related to gender, with the Pale Woman’s femininity and sexual appeal being greatly emphasised. Her face may be his, but it is ‘softened to a woman’s countenance’ and it is noted that the Pale Woman’s clothes ‘did not conceal the womanly curves of her body’.³⁴⁵ Overall, the idea that Beloved has male cisgender anatomy is convincing on the surface but is quickly undermined upon closer inspection – as with the information about female cisgender anatomy, the supposed facts are revealed as assumptions, guesswork, and unreliable.

There is additionally the possibility that Beloved’s anatomy does not actually align with cisnormative expectations, or even human ones. Towards the end of the ninth book in the series, the text confirms that Beloved may not share enough physical features with humans to be categorised in the way that humans typically are – Fitz states that ‘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’.³⁴⁶ This lends a new degree of complexity to any analysis of anatomy as related to gender in this sequence, as we simply do not know how much it is even possible to gender Beloved using a cisnormative, anatomy-based system. It also adds to the conflicting and, on close inspection, vague information that is given about Beloved throughout the series

³⁴² Hobb, *Fool’s Fate*, p. 461.

³⁴³ Hobb, *Fool’s Fate*, p. 449.

³⁴⁴ Hobb, *Fool’s Fate*, p. 442.

³⁴⁵ Hobb, *Fool’s Fate*, p. 442.

³⁴⁶ Hobb, *Fool’s Fate*, p. 634.

As significant as the information that is given in the series is the information that is hidden. The depiction of Beloved in ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ not only demonstrates the ways in which information can be presented in an ambiguous manner, but also the ways in which obfuscation and concealment can be used to support the depiction of a non-binary character. There are several examples of this in the series, with the most notable being the consistent concealment of Beloved’s chest. This begins quite early in the series. At a point approximately two thirds of the way through *Royal Assassin* (book two), Beloved visits Fitz after having been beaten quite badly. Fitz offers medical assistance, at which point this exchange takes place:

‘Take your shirt off,’ I told the Fool [Beloved]. ‘Let’s see your chest.’
‘I’ve seen it, thank you, and I assure you it’s fine. When they popped the bag over my head, I presume it was to provide a target. They were most conscientious about striking nowhere else.’³⁴⁷

While this refusal is very much in character, reflecting both Beloved’s typical insistence on privacy and their use of wit and language to deflect to preserve it, it is also the earliest occasion upon which Beloved is prompted to actively conceal their body from both Fitz and the reader. Specifically, they are concealing their chest, which in cisnormative societies such as those depicted in the ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ series would typically be used to judge their gender. As Beloved’s perspective is not revealed to the reader, it is unclear whether or not Beloved’s refusal in this scene is related to a rejection of the conflation of gender and anatomy, the fear of being misgendered, or simply a desire for privacy. It is also possible that Beloved’s words are accurate (they suffered no injury to their chest); however, Fitz does note that at the end of their meeting Beloved ‘walked to the door, stiffly despite his claims that they had only damaged his face’.³⁴⁸ This undermines Beloved’s words, and implies another

³⁴⁷ Robin Hobb, *Royal Assassin* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 470.

³⁴⁸ Hobb, *Royal Assassin*, p. 472.

reason behind them. While not in any way explicitly making a connection to gender, this scene contributes to the persistent ambiguity of Beloved's anatomy by concealing information – and this is not the only occasion that this technique is used.

The Golden Fool (book eight) also contains a scene in which Beloved's chest is deliberately and actively concealed from both Fitz and the reader. Towards the end of *The Golden Fool*, Beloved shows Fitz the tattoos on their back, though with great caution: '[t]he sheet fell away from his naked back, but his free hand continued to clutch it to his chest'.³⁴⁹ While it is quite possible to argue that these newly revealed tattoos were the reason behind Beloved's refusal to remove their shirt in *Royal Assassin*, it is worth noting that despite their being revealed Beloved is still deliberately and carefully preventing Fitz (and by extension, the reader) from seeing their chest. Both chest-concealment scenes centre on evasion – on maintaining an ambiguity around Beloved's anatomy that is central to the text's depiction of non-binary gender.

In summary, while it does initially appear that the text is providing anatomical information in order to gender Beloved, closer inspection reveals that this information is framed as second or third-hand and able to be easily undermined. The 'kinds of truth about gender we demand from the lives of people who [...] refuse normative gender categories' that Halberstam describes are themselves refused.³⁵⁰ Ambiguity remains key to Beloved's depiction, used as it is to disrupt the cisnormative conflation of anatomy with gender and in concert with the providing of information that in a cisnormative framework would be viewed as conflicting. By providing multiple possibilities around Beloved's anatomy, the text refuses to give the

³⁴⁹ Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 662.

³⁵⁰ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, p. 48.

reader any clear information that could be taken to gender them according to a cisnormative framework. This strengthens the depiction of Beloved as non-binary by a simple refusal to share information that might be used to enforce a cisnormative standard.

Stances of Other Characters and Their Impact

In the third book of the series, *Assassin's Quest*, it is revealed that another character has formed a different understanding of Beloved's gender to Fitz's. Starling tells Fitz that '[t]he Fool [Beloved] is a woman, and she is in love with you'.³⁵¹ Starling's perspective is the first one that directly contradicts Fitz's (which is that Beloved is a cisgender man), and leads directly to Fitz and Beloved's first discussion around Beloved's gender. The disagreement between Fitz and Starling generates ambiguity: which of them is correct? When Fitz raises the issue with Beloved, Beloved's evasion of any answer that would fit within a cisnormative frame begins the process of disturbing cisnormativity that will continue throughout the series. Simultaneously, Starling's authenticity and knowledge are both undermined: 'What does it matter what she thinks? Let her think whatever is easiest for her to believe', Beloved argues.³⁵² Starling's position on the subject is dismissed, and she eventually partially retracts it. The reader has been provided with one idea of how Beloved may fit into a cisnormative framework, but it is quickly undermined and withdrawn, not just preserving but adding to their ambiguity.

Something similar occurs several books later. Fitz's description of the Pale Woman states that '[n]o man could have looked at her and not felt a stirring of lust', and she utilises this perception of her as she attempts to lure Fitz to her side and turn him against Beloved.³⁵³ In

³⁵¹ Hobb, *Assassin's Quest*, p. 551.

³⁵² Hobb, *Assassin's Quest*, p. 634.

³⁵³ Hobb, *Fool's Fate*, p. 449.

some ways she is enacting the role of the archetypal femme fatale.³⁵⁴ She also explicitly brings gender (and, by implication in the cisnormative context, anatomy) into the equation when attempting to convince Fitz of her goals:

And I shall delight you a thousand times more than your pitiful Fool did. For we are, at last, the perfect fit for one another. We shall be not just Prophet and Catalyst, but male and female, making the whole that turns the world. I will be to you everything that he secretly longed to be to you and could not. Except that I will be perfect, as he was flawed.³⁵⁵

The Pale Woman's gender is presented as entwined with her anatomy (specifically, with her ability to bear a child), and she proceeds to enforce a similar entanglement on Beloved, referring to them only as *he* and emphasising both their presumed maleness and inability to bear Fitz a child. This is not, during the scene itself, something that Fitz's narration particularly resists, and Beloved is not able to speak up. This passive acceptance on Fitz's part and the steady reinforcement of Beloved's supposed masculinity in contrast with the Pale Woman's femininity could be seen as a concession to the conflation of gender with anatomy common to the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre. However, the Pale Woman is a *villain*. Her morals are dubious at best and much of her stance is framed as wrong by the narrative or actively countered by other characters. Placing her gender/anatomy conflation firmly alongside her declaration of (largely evil) intent does imply that the conflation might be equally incorrect – or at least that the significance she places on it is worth rejecting.

Both Starling and the Pale Woman offer their own understandings of Beloved and attempt to resolve Beloved's ambiguity into a cisnormative frame. As discussed in chapter two, this is not uncommon for gender ambiguous characters; Brian Attebery states that 'it is possible to

³⁵⁴ Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1992), p. viii.

³⁵⁵ Hobb, *Fool's Fate*, p. 459.

force the ambiguous character into a more conventional category; by the story's end, the author or reader (or both in collusion) discovers the "real" gender of the character and reinterprets events accordingly'.³⁵⁶ However, this resolve is never permitted to succeed, and is instead each time followed by emphasis on Beloved's non-binary gender and a refusal to grant any knowledge of Beloved's anatomy to the reader that may be use to breach their ambiguity and misgender them in a cisnormative framework.

The Impact of the Cisnormative Setting

At the outset of this chapter, I discussed cultural norms around gender in 'Realm of the Elderlings'. In the 2017-18 'Mask of Shadows' duology, with its central non-binary character, the culture that is depicted is one which allows for non-binary gender – while cisnormativity is present in places, it no longer dominates to such an extent that non-binary gender is entirely erased, and there is room for both Sal and the queer community they find. This is not the case in 'Realm of the Elderlings', which is predominantly cisnormative. Instead, 'Realm of the Elderlings' depicts a world poised on the brink of change. Bingtown is emerging from patriarchy; Jamaillia is descending further into it. Kelsingra, the city repopulated in the 'Rain Wild Chronicles', is an embryonic queernormative society. The option to accept Beloved is present, even though there is no societal support behind it – and Fitz eventually takes it, as we will see in chapter four. 'Realm of the Elderlings' is a series hovering on the edge of many kinds of societal change, particularly around gender. The way in which Beloved uses ambiguity to evade cisnormativity reflects this; their position in the narrative is liminal and shifting, and as discussed in chapter four they in many ways embody this potential for change as the series progresses. Where the 'Mask of Shadows' duology depicts a specifically queernormative possibility, 'Realm of the Elderlings' instead returns us

³⁵⁶ Attebery, p. 9.

to the tipping point between cultural gender norms, demonstrating not what an alternative could look like as much as the fact that an alternative (any alternative) is possible. It remains ambiguous exactly which future awaits the characters in the ‘Realm of the Elderlings’, as we are shown directions more than results. The ambiguous character is not forced into ‘a more conventional category’ as Brian Attebury describes, and neither is the shifting cultural landscape resolved into one answer or another.³⁵⁷ This creates the space for Beloved to exist as a non-binary character, simultaneously disrupting and evading cisnormativity while never entirely escaping it.

This position is a fundamentally defensive one that is both maintained by the narration and that Beloved themselves maintains through both humour and avoidance. The way in which Beloved handles the gender/anatomy conflation is complex, and often involves some concessions to it being the standard understanding of gender in the cisnormative environment that they are presenting within. This adds to the ambiguity that surrounds Beloved’s anatomy, as it is not always clear when – for example – the use of humour is meant to confirm or deny any particular fact. Beloved evades and rejects categorisation throughout the text, both by concealing their anatomy and by leaning into ambiguity. Humour is a significant element of this.

Humour, Resistance, and Ambiguity

When Fitz finally confronts Beloved on the subject of Starling’s statement, Beloved’s use of humour is central to their response:

‘Why do you allow Starling to believe you are a woman?’
He [Beloved] turned to me, waggled his eyebrows and blew me a kiss.
‘And am I not, fair princeling?’

³⁵⁷ Attebury, p. 9.

‘I’m serious,’ I rebuked him. ‘She thinks you are a woman and in love with me. She thought we had a tryst last night.’
 ‘And did we not, my shy one?’ He leered at me outrageously.
 ‘Fool,’ I said warningly.
 ‘Ah.’ He sighed suddenly. ‘Perhaps the truth is, I fear to show her my proof, lest ever afterwards she find all other men a disappointment.’ He gestured meaningfully at himself.³⁵⁸

Beloved’s phallic joke is certainly a joke, but in context the nature of the joke is ambiguous – is Beloved joking about the size of their penis, or about having one at all? The use of humour is a common feature of Beloved’s response when asked for personal information, and continues throughout the scene. Discussing the psychology of humour, Rod A. Martin argues that humour can ‘be used to push the boundaries of social propriety, attack “sacred cows,” and rebel against social norms’.³⁵⁹ Beloved’s humour is frequently disruptive to social propriety, pushing against the cisnormativity of both the fictional culture and Fitz’s interpretation of any given events. Beloved’s phallic joke appears to confirm that anatomy can be seen as “proof” of gender: ‘I fear to show her my proof’.³⁶⁰ However, this implication may well be part of what is being mocked. When Fitz continues to press the issue, Beloved resorts to pointedly criticising Fitz’s understanding of love, sexuality, and gender, referring to the latter as ‘[m]ere plumbing, when all is said and done. Why is it important?’.³⁶¹ There is no particular distinction made here between anatomy and gender; if anything, the two are conflated before being abruptly dismissed as ‘[m]ere plumbing’.³⁶² Fitz disagrees but cannot argue back in any particularly coherent way, stating that ‘[i]t all seemed so obvious to me as to not need saying’.³⁶³ This conversation culminates in a rather memorable song that Beloved produces spontaneously, in mockery of both Fitz and Starling:

³⁵⁸ Hobb, *Assassin’s Quest*, p. 634.

³⁵⁹ Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (London: Elsevier Science & Technology, 2006), p. 118.

³⁶⁰ Hobb, *Assassin’s Quest*, p. 634.

³⁶¹ Hobb, *Assassin’s Quest*, p. 551.

³⁶² Hobb, *Assassin’s Quest*, p. 551.

³⁶³ Hobb, *Assassin’s Quest*, p. 635.

Oh, when the Fool pisses
Pray tell, what's the angle?
Did we take down his pants
Would he dimple or dangle?³⁶⁴

Though here Beloved draws no specific distinction between gender and anatomy, allowing one to signify the other without question as they did earlier in the scene, they nevertheless attack the significance of both concepts. While Beloved does not explicitly argue against gender and anatomy being the same, they do argue that neither should be granted as much importance as Fitz thinks. This is both a resistance to the idea that the ambiguous character should resolve into cisnormativity and also a rejection of the significance or even existence of a perceived, hidden truth that would answer the question raised over Beloved's gender.

Specifically, this depiction of ambiguity involves acknowledging that the strength of the traditional gender/anatomy conflation means that viewing Beloved's anatomy might cause Fitz and/or the reader to misgender them – and therefore, this anatomical information will not be given. This decision has the peculiar effect of both reinforcing and rejecting the gender/anatomy conflation – it reinforces the fact that the gender/anatomy conflation is a strong presence in this fictional society, but questions its validity by refusing to entirely concede to it. This is the inverse of what Talia Mae Bettcher calls 'identity enforcement embedded within a context of possible deception, revelation, and disclosure', in which a cisgender person refuses a transgender person's declared gender by referring to their anatomy.³⁶⁵ Instead of framing this concealment as deception that must be overcome to resolve Beloved's ambiguity into cisnormativity, the concealment of Beloved's anatomy is

³⁶⁴ Hobb, *Assassin's Quest*, p. 635.

³⁶⁵ Bettcher, p. 281.

instead framed as a necessary defensive measure in a cisnormative environment. Beloved's anatomy is ambiguous and by being so cannot be used to misgender them.

This preventative measure, admitting the power of the gender/anatomy conflation and seeing ways to evade it, escalates at the end of *Fool's Fate*. When Beloved is fatally injured, Fitz uses magic to heal Beloved, at one point literally occupying their body in order to do so. In this sequence, remarkably for a trans narrative, there is no moment of anatomical revelation. This is unexpected. Attebery has argued that ambiguous characters are typically resolved by the end of the narrative; Halberstam, discussing depictions of transgender people in film, discusses the way in which 'exposure as transgender constitutes the film's narrative climax' and argues that this is a common feature of transgender narratives.³⁶⁶ The absence of this in the depiction of Beloved as non-binary is a surprising contrast. By the end of this healing/body-swap sequence, it is reasonable to assume that Fitz is fully aware of the facts of Beloved's anatomy – however, Fitz does not relate any information or opinions on the subject to the reader. This preserves, in a specific way, the ambiguity that has been central to the depiction of Beloved since the very first book of the series, and escalates the evasion of anatomical information from something Beloved is responsible for to something that Fitz has now taken on in his role as an ally (discussed in chapter four). It also contrasts with the anatomical revelation common to transgender narratives, as discussed by Halberstam, and sets 'Realm of the Elderlings' as a distinctive pseudo-medieval fantasy text in its handling of non-binary gender.

³⁶⁶ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, p. 78.

Contesting Gender/Anatomy Conflation

The conflation of gender and anatomy is not absent from the ‘Realm of the Elderlings’, and in fact is fundamental to the way the various fictional cultures depicted understand gender. However, the depiction of Beloved uses humour, ambiguity, and a combination of second-hand information with deliberate obfuscation in order to challenge this conflation and complicate the depiction of cisnormativity. This renders Beloved quite distinct from other non-binary characters in the pre-2017 examples – Beloved must work within the constraints of cisnormativity, certainly, but is nevertheless granted the power to control information about themselves, control their own presentation, and influence the way they are understood by other characters. Beloved is depicted within a cisnormative context, but still as a character for whom gender and anatomy are not related and self-identification is prioritised over external categorisation. Halberstam’s question as to ‘what kinds of truth about gender we demand from the lives of people who pass, cross-dress, or simply refuse normative gender categories’ is echoed throughout Beloved’s depiction, particularly in their relationship with Fitz.³⁶⁷ Truth – or what is perceived to be truth in a cisnormative framework – is demanded several times, and Beloved employs ambiguity to navigate around it, disrupting cisnormative concepts and creating space for non-binary gender. Simultaneously, Beloved never fully emerges from cisnormativity, and retains evasive and defensive techniques such as humour to obfuscate information that might be used to misgender them.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I began my analysis of Beloved by setting them in the context of the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre and working through several elements of their depiction, arguing that ambiguity is key to what distinguishes them from other non-binary characters. In many cases,

³⁶⁷ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, p. 48.

their depiction falls between the pre-2017 focus on the monstrous and fantastical concepts of non-binary gender and the depictions in 2017-onwards texts, such as Linsey Miller's 'Mask of Shadows', which humanise and prioritise non-binary characters and perspectives. Beloved, like most pre-2017 non-binary characters, is not depicted as part of a queer community, and is not literally fully human. And yet, Beloved's non-binary gender is framed as separate from their partial lack of literal humanity, anatomy is not used to define them, and they are shown as using humour, language, and presentation choices in order to influence how they are treated and perceived by the other (cisgender) characters. Ambiguity is key to this, used as a protective measure which helps to prevent readers and other characters from obtaining the information that would be needed to gender them in a cisnormative framework.

Across the topics of pronoun use, literal humanity/inhumanity, and the conflation (or lack thereof) of gender identity with anatomy, Beloved's depiction echoes the increasing public awareness of and changing attitudes to non-binary gender in the 1995-2017 period that 'Realm of the Elderlings' was published. The presentation of Beloved's non-binary gender is quite different from many of the pre-2017 examples in a number of ways – but it also differs sharply from the depictions that follow (Sal, Tashi). I argued in chapter two that non-binary representation in the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre is limited to non-human characters with few exceptions, riddled with dehumanisation and the conflation of gender identity with anatomy, and used primarily to reinforce the traditional gender binary rather than to explore alternatives. While Hobb's Beloved is not entirely free of these aspects of presentation, they nonetheless demonstrate a much greater range of possibilities simply by being a multi-layered, complex, and dynamic non-binary character whose gender is not a limiting factor or sole definition.

Chapter Four: Queering the Cisgender Perspective

In this chapter I am discussing first the narrative framing of Beloved, and then their narrative role. Central to the depiction of non-binary gender in fiction is the perspective through which that character is framed. In the 2017-onwards pseudo-medieval fantasy examples, such as Linsey Miller's 'Mask of Shadows' duology, the non-binary character themselves has either part or the whole of the perspective of the novel; in pre-2017 pseudo-medieval fantasy examples, however, the non-binary character is typically presented to the reader through the perspective of a cisgender character. The way in which the 'Realm of the Elderlings' series handles the possibility of non-binary gender is comparatively subtle, and filtered entirely through a cisgender perspective – usually in the form of Fitz's narrative viewpoint, but occasionally the narrative viewpoints of other cisgender characters. With Fitz as the first person narrator of six books exclusively (the 'Farseer' and 'Tawny Man' trilogies) and three books in part (the 'Fitz and the Fool' trilogy), as well as being the perhaps the only major character to be strongly familiar with Beloved, his perspective on Beloved is the most significant. It is through his perspective that we are given almost every piece of pertinent information about Beloved's non-binary gender.

This means that key to my analysis in this chapter is narratology, specifically queer narratology. Jonathan Culler defines narratology as 'the recognition that narrative theory requires a distinction between "story", a sequence of actions or events conceived as independent of their manifestation in discourse, and "discourse", the discursive presentation or narration of events'.³⁶⁸ Queer narratology, in turn, speaks to and involves ideas from queer

³⁶⁸ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 2001), p189.

theory, and engages with what it means to queer a narrative, or to read a narrative as queer, among other possible concepts. Susan S. Lanser's paper, 'Queering Narrative Voice', focuses on the nature of queer narrative voice, with three particular possible versions:

1. a voice belonging to a textual speaker who can be identified as a queer subject by virtue of sex, gender, or sexuality;
2. a voice that is textually ambiguous or subverts the conventions of sex, gender, or sexuality; and
3. a voice that confounds the rules for voice itself and thus baffles our categorical assumptions about narrators and narrative.³⁶⁹

Fitz himself doesn't fit into any of these definitions initially: he's a heteronormative, cisnormative voice, and his perspective on the events of the story reflects this. He's not a queer subject, he is not textually ambiguous or subverting conventions, and he is not confounding the rules for voice itself. However, something changes over the course of the series – he progresses through a series of stages and begins to support Beloved's subversions of 'the conventions of sex, gender, or sexuality'.³⁷⁰ Lanser refers to the idea of queering as an act but her paper primarily discusses queerness as a fixed state; what is demonstrable in the 'Realm of the Elderlings' is queering as a process.

Lanser's work exists within the broader contexts of both narratology and queer theory, which I use throughout this analysis. In the upcoming sections, I will be discussing a wide variety of critical approaches, including Ruth Page's work on feminist and queer narratology, Judith Butler's discussion of cultural intelligibility and gender, Sue J. Kim on empathy in narratology, Vivian K. Namaste and Talia Mae Bettcher on transphobia, J. Halberstam on trans narratives, Lisa Droogendyk et al on allyship, Peggy Phelan on queer focalization and grief, Heather Love and J. Halberstam on queer failure, and Peter Melville on queer

³⁶⁹ Susan S. Lanser, 'Queering Narrative Voice', *Textual Practice*, 32.6 (2018), 923-937 (p. 926)

<<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2018.1486540>>.

³⁷⁰ Lanser, 'Queering Narrative Voice', p. 926.

analogues in the ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ books. By incorporating multiple approaches, I can analyse the way in which Fitz’s cisgender perspective influences the depiction of Beloved.

Diegetic and Extra-Diegetic Narration

The nature of Fitz’s viewpoint itself adds several layers of complexity to any analysis, however. In order to distinguish between the elements of his viewpoint, I will use the terminology offered by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (1983), specifically the concepts of diegetic/extradiegetic narration. On the surface and seen most clearly at the beginnings and endings of each book or trilogy, we have the extradiegetic level of narrative – Fitz, older than he is during the other events described in the relevant trilogy, writing about his experiences as a younger man. The extradiegetic level (Fitz writing) frames the diegetic level (the events that Fitz is writing about). As Fitz, like Rimmon-Kenan’s example of Pip from *Great Expectations*, ‘tells a story in which a younger version of himself participated’, his narration is also homodiegetic – the extradiegetic narrator is present in the diegetic narrative.³⁷¹ The extradiegetic nature of Fitz’s narration not only serves as a framing device at the starts and ends of parts of the narrative but is also used to allow space for the older Fitz to comment, often unflatteringly, on his younger self’s decisions and behaviours throughout the text. It becomes clear in the ‘Tawny Man’ trilogy that Fitz’s writing of the ‘Farseer’ events has already taken place, and the same with the writing of ‘Tawny Man’ trilogy in the ‘Fitz and the Fool’ trilogy; in other words, each Fitz-narrated trilogy is “written” by Fitz long after the events of that trilogy have concluded but before the events of the next trilogy occur.

³⁷¹ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 96-97.

Table 4: Extra-Diegetic Framing in 'Realm of the Elderlings'

No.	Book Title	Trilogy	Extra-Diegetic Fitz
1	<i>Assassin's Apprentice</i>	'Farseer'	Writing from post-'Farseer', pre-'Tawny Man'
2	<i>Royal Assassin</i>	'Farseer'	Writing from post-'Farseer', pre-'Tawny Man'
3	<i>Assassin's Quest</i>	'Farseer'	Writing from post-'Farseer', pre-'Tawny Man'
7	<i>Fool's Errand</i>	'Tawny Man'	Writing from post-'Tawny Man', pre-'Fitz and the Fool'
8	<i>The Golden Fool</i>	'Tawny Man'	Writing from post-'Tawny Man', pre-'Fitz and the Fool'
9	<i>Fool's Fate</i>	'Tawny Man'	Writing from post-'Tawny Man', pre-'Fitz and the Fool'
14	<i>Fool's Assassin</i>	'Fitz and the Fool'	Dictating from the end of 'Fitz and the Fool'
15	<i>Fool's Quest</i>	'Fitz and the Fool'	Dictating from the end of 'Fitz and the Fool'
16	<i>Assassin's Fate</i>	'Fitz and the Fool'	Dictating from the end of 'Fitz and the Fool'

The extradiegetic Fitz of the 'Farseer' trilogy, for example, has not yet been through the events of the 'Tawny Man' trilogy and so can apply no knowledge gained during that time. This has the effect of blurring or confusing the extradiegetic nature of Fitz's narration in the 'Tawny Man' trilogy, as the time frame of one trilogy's extradiegetic level overlaps to a degree with the time frame of the next trilogy's diegetic level (the level upon which the events that Fitz is describing take place). The extradiegetic Fitz of the 'Fitz and the Fool' trilogy is writing from the very end of that trilogy – or more precisely, telling his daughter Bee, in the period immediately before his death – and so while he is not writing from the time of another trilogy, he is writing from a point after the end of the majority of the events of the 'Fitz and the Fool' trilogy. Diegetic Fitz is interacting with Beloved directly as well as observing the other characters' interactions with or observations of Beloved; extradiegetic Fitz is conveying both of these elements to the reader considerably after the fact and reflecting on them.

The layers of Fitz's perspective allow for much greater subtlety in his view of Beloved than might otherwise be the case. Fitz's perspective, moreover, is not constant but shifts over time and through the series, creating not only progressively different stances but also a tension between extradiegetic Fitz and diegetic Fitz when their stances differ (which is a regular occurrence). These shifts can be viewed as a transition, for Fitz, from assumptions to allyship (and finally, consolidation). In order to analyse this transition more precisely, I have divided it into stages as follows: initial assumptions (stage one), queer existence (stage two), tolerance (stage three), queer insistence (stage four), acceptance (stage five), queer vulnerability (stage six), allyship (stage seven), and consolidation (stage eight).

Stage One: Initial Assumptions

At their very first encounter, and for most of the first trilogy of the series, diegetic Fitz assumes that Beloved is male. We are made aware through the extradiegetic Fitz that there is a question around Beloved's gender – the epigraph before their first meeting states that:

*The gender of the Fool has been disputed. When directly questioned on this matter by a younger and more forward person than I am now, the Fool replied that it was no one's business but his own. So I concede.*³⁷²

Diegetic Fitz is unaware of this. He considers Beloved to be notably strange in many ways (appearance, behaviour, intentions), but does not remark on Beloved's gender.

This first stage, in which the cisgender narrative perspective demonstrates that cisnormativity is the default, is one that 'Realm of the Elderlings' shares with all of the other pre-2017 texts.

There is little or no acknowledgement of any other possible understandings of gender; all characters viewed by the narrating character (whether a first person narration or a third person focalizer) are assumed to fit into cisnormative categories.

³⁷² Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice*, p. 164.

This is the basic framework that Fitz begins with, and this default to cisgender bears a strong resemblance to the treatment of male as neutral and female as Other. Feminist writing has frequently discussed the way in which the default figure (of viewpoint, of character, of reader) is male, rather than female – for example, in the work of Kate Millett³⁷³ or Toril Moi.³⁷⁴ Ursula K. Le Guin describes one of the fundamental assumptions of writing as being that all the participants of it are male:

This assumption turns up in fiction in endless ways: in the belief, borne out by the entire substance of the book, that what men do is of universal interest, while women's occupations are trivial, so that men are the proper focus of story, women peripheral to it; in women being observed only as they relate to men, and their conversation reported only as it relates to men; in vivid descriptions of the bodies and faces of sexually attractive young women, but not of men or older women; in presuming the reader will welcome misogynistic statements; in pretending the pronoun *he* includes both genders; and so on.³⁷⁵

Le Guin is describing one aspect of a field discussed by many other feminist writers. Laura Mulvey's well-known essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1973) focuses on the gendered nature of Hollywood cinema. Mulvey argues that Hollywood cinema is created around the prioritisation of the male gaze – that is, that the assumed audience member (or the only particularly significant one) is male, and heterosexual, and therefore that the film in question has been designed to appeal to him, often by objectifying female characters.³⁷⁶ The idea of the male default and subsequent male framing has occupied a significant place in feminist theory. This includes work as varied as analysis of how adaptation of a text can alter the framing of it from feminist to patriarchal,³⁷⁷ discussions of crossing gender lines between

³⁷³ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Hart-Davis, 1971).

³⁷⁴ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985).

³⁷⁵ Guin, *The Wave in the Mind*, p. 242.

³⁷⁶ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16.3 (1975), 6-18.

³⁷⁷ Marion Krauthaker and Roy Connolly, 'Gazing at Medusa: Adaptation as Phallogocentric Appropriation in Blue Is the Warmest Color', *European Comic Art* 10.1 (2017), 24-40.

authors and narrators,³⁷⁸ and overlaps between what Peel describes as unnatural narratives and feminist narratives.³⁷⁹ Feminist narratology is a key field in this discourse, focusing as it does on questioning this default to male framing and exploring alternatives – particularly in the work of Ruth Page³⁸⁰ and Susan S. Lanser.³⁸¹

While this defaulting to male frames women as Other and as object, it also refuses entirely to acknowledge the existence of transgender and non-binary people. The male/woman Self/Other dynamic is centred on cisnormativity, and does not allow room for alternative concepts of gender or its relationship with sex. In discussing the psychiatric approach to non-binary patients, Sarah Murjan and Walter Pierre Bouman state that '[n]on-binary people experience invisibility as there is little general awareness and understanding of non-binary people', and this invisibility is reflected by the absence of non-binary characters in much of pseudo-medieval fantasy literature.³⁸²

Mulvey's concept of the male gaze is useful as a way of considering how the *gaze* or perspective of a fictional account influences the depiction of its characters, but how a non-binary character is framed by a cisgender narrative perspective is obviously going to differ from how a female character is framed by a male narrative perspective. Their common ground is the direction of the power dynamic: the Self viewing the Other and in doing so, perpetuating its Othering. Beneath the male/female dynamic is the tendency to default to cisgender and binary, erasing non-binary gender in the process. This defaulting is visible in

³⁷⁸ *Cross-Gendered Literary Voices: Appropriating, Resisting, Embracing*, ed. by Rina Kim and Claire Westall (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

³⁷⁹ Ellen Peel, 'Unnatural Feminist Narratology', *Storyworlds*, 8.2 (2016), 81-112.

³⁸⁰ Ruth Page, *Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Feminist Narratology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

³⁸¹ Susan S. Lanser, 'Toward a Feminist Narratology', *Style*, 20.3 (1986), 341-63
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42945612>> [accessed 19 March 2021].

³⁸² Sarah Murjan and Walter Pierre Bouman, 'Psychiatry', in *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*, ed. by Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman, and Meg-John Barker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 125-140 (p. 133).

many of the aspects of non-binary depiction that I have discussed so far in this thesis – the figurative dehumanisation of any non-binary gender by use of the pronoun *it*, the confining of non-binary gender to non-human characters, the minor narrative roles of non-binary gender characters, and the conflation of gender identity with anatomy. When non-binary characters are present, there is a great deal of reluctance to acknowledge them in the framing narrative, as they are denied validity and refused internality. Sarah Hayden argues that ‘the cultural construction of gender as dyadic produces an oppressive identity regime’ which not only places limitations on the types of male or female narratives that are permitted but also largely refuses to acknowledge non-cisgender narratives at all.³⁸³ The cisgender/non-binary dynamic (defaulting to cisgender as neutral) cannot be entirely disentangled from the male/female dynamic (defaulting to male as neutral); both are created by this enforcement of a binary gender structure.

Defaulting in this way also returns us to Butler, and the idea of gender as a norm –as something that is key to social intelligibility.³⁸⁴ This *initial assumption* stage of Fitz’s narrative has a very rigid sensibility, a dyadic understanding of gender forming an identity regime that refuses anything beyond strict definitions of male and female. Diegetic Fitz’s cishnormative gaze renders all non-normative gender invisible, defining the non-binary Beloved by external markers of Fitz’s selection rather than by self-definition as preferred by the transgender and non-binary community. The presence of extradiegetic Fitz overlaying this brings diegetic Fitz’s limitations into sharp relief: diegetic Fitz, trapped in his initial assumptions of the cisgender default, finds only two strictly-defined genders to qualify for

³⁸³ Sarah Hayden, ‘What Happens When a Transvestite Gynaecologist Usurps the Narrator?: Cross-Gendered Ventriloquism in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*’, in *Cross-Gendered Literary Voices: Appropriating, Resisting, Embracing*, ed. by Rina Kim and Claire Westall (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 74-92 (p. 79).

³⁸⁴ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 41.

social intelligibility and therefore visibility and validity. But extradiegetic Fitz, already in stage three, allows the text to present an alternate possibility – and leads the reader towards diegetic Fitz’s next stage, *queer existence*.

Stage Two: Queer Existence

Towards the end of *Assassin’s Quest*, Fitz’s initial assumptions are challenged. As discussed above, Starling insists that ‘[t]he Fool is a woman, and she is in love with you’, something which Fitz considers to be entirely ridiculous.³⁸⁵ He is then further disconcerted by Beloved’s reaction to the incident, which is to refuse to confirm their gender in Fitz’s terms and then to deconstruct and mock Fitz’s insistence on gender norms and preoccupation with anatomy as a defining feature.

‘That is one thing that in all my years among your folk I have never become accustomed to. The great importance that you attach to what gender one is.’
‘Well it is important...’ I began.
‘Rubbish!’ he exclaimed. ‘Mere plumbing, when all is said and done. Why is it important?’³⁸⁶

Fitz’s lack of ability to counter Beloved’s argument reveals that his cisnormative assumptions are social norms, every bit as ‘tenuously embodied’ as Butler argues.³⁸⁷ As such, Beloved’s stance is a startling disruption that shakes the foundations of his understanding.

This second stage is *queer existence*. Fitz’s cisnormative default in the first stage is disrupted by Beloved’s queerness. Beloved’s disruption largely takes the form of refusal, holding to the ambiguity discussed at length in chapter three of this thesis – they refuse to confirm or deny any particular sex or gender when questioned. When I discussed this ambiguity in chapter three, it was tied to ideas about truth as explored by Halberstam, who questioned ‘what kinds

³⁸⁵ Hobb, *Assassin’s Quest*, p. 551.

³⁸⁶ Hobb, *Assassin’s Quest*, p. 634.

³⁸⁷ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 41.

of truth about gender we demand from the lives of people who pass, cross-dress, or simply refuse normative gender categories'.³⁸⁸ Beloved not only refuses this demand for truth but mocks it with a song:

‘Oh, when the Fool pisses
Pray tell, what’s the angle?
Did we take down his pants
Would he dimple or dangle?’³⁸⁹

Beloved leaves the question of anatomy unanswered. In this way, however, Beloved is telling a different kind of truth, one of gender that diverges from the cisnormative model. This opens a door to a concept of gender closer to Butler’s, in which ‘[g]ender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time’.³⁹⁰ Beloved’s gender is beyond the straightforward definitions of Fitz’s cisnormativity, and this scene alone cannot display all of it. Instead, Beloved leaves Fitz with what it is *not*; what *is* has been deferred, as the concept in full is beyond Fitz’s understanding. Butler also discusses in *Undoing Gender* the potential reasons an individual may wish to reject the socially intelligible concepts of gender in a cisnormative environment:

There are advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms. Indeed, if my options are loathsome, if I have no desire to be recognized within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred.³⁹¹

Beloved very much behaves as if their ‘options are loathsome’, avoiding ‘recognition’ as either cisgender male or cisgender female (the two intelligible options to Fitz).³⁹² They refuse to clarify any positive answer and even as the text continues, Beloved remains largely

³⁸⁸ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, p. 48.

³⁸⁹ Hobb, *Assassin’s Quest*, p. 635.

³⁹⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 22.

³⁹¹ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 4.

³⁹² Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 4.

unintelligible to Fitz. However, this refusal of intelligibility is not taken any further – an exasperated Fitz allows the subject to drop. When (in foreshadowing of the last of these stages) Fitz and Beloved are briefly magically blended into one, Fitz’s sudden comprehension of Beloved is almost immediately taken away:

‘I was the Fool [Beloved] and the Fool was me. He was the catalyst and so was I. We were two halves of a whole, sundered and come together again. For an instant I knew him in his entirety, complete and magical, and then he was pulling away from me, laughing, a bubble inside me, separate and unknowable, yet joined of me.’³⁹³

Returning to narratology, this disruption of diegetic Fitz’s narrative perspective is unsurprising. Firstly, Beloved’s non-binary gender has already been hinted at by the extradiegetic Fitz during the first two books of the series. In *Assassin’s Apprentice* we are told that ‘[t]he gender of the Fool [Beloved] has been disputed’ (italics in original).³⁹⁴ In *Royal Assassin* this is then expanded to clarify that ‘[h]is origin, age, sex and race have all been the subject of conjecture’ (italics in original).³⁹⁵ Secondly, Fitz’s diegetic narrative has been regularly commented on by his extradiegetic self throughout the trilogy, something which more generally undermines the legitimacy of the opinions given by the diegetic perspective. Sue J. Kim describes this kind of narrative model as ‘creating a space between the ideological naivete of the protagonist(s) at the diegetic level, and the more complex analysis of the narrator or implied author’ and states that ‘the distance between the child narrator and the adult narrator allows the text to reflect on the ideological forces at work on the child narrator’.³⁹⁶ This is not as clear in ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ as it is in the texts that Kim is discussing – Fitz’s extradiegetic commentary does not give detailed thoughts, only the

³⁹³ Hobb, *Assassin’s Quest*, p. 733-734.

³⁹⁴ Hobb, *Assassin’s Apprentice*, p. 164.

³⁹⁵ Hobb, *Royal Assassin*, p. 234.

³⁹⁶ Sue J. Kim, ‘Empathy and 1970s Novels by Third World Women’, in *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, ed. by Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser, (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015), pp. 147-165 (p. 156).

occasional remark – but the effect still perseveres. The space created between diegetic (young, inexperienced, ignorant) Fitz and extradiegetic (older, more experienced, more knowledgeable) Fitz encourages reader questioning of diegetic Fitz’s perception of events and peoples. Diegetic Fitz has insisted for two and a half books that there is no queerness, that cisnormativity is the only truth – but the presence of extradiegetic Fitz has given room for doubt.

When Beloved’s disruption of this cisnormativity arrives, it is a rejection of Fitz’s power as a narrator to define everyone else – Beloved twists out of Fitz’s reach not by identifying themselves positively but by refusing to giving Fitz a label with which to identify them. Fitz’s perspective can no longer be trusted to be correct about Beloved, because Fitz has not been given any kind of answer he can use.

In queer narratology, Susan S. Lanser describes the meaning of *queer* by describing ‘the three academic uses of the verb: (1) to make a claim for the non-heteronormative sex, gender, or sexuality of someone or something; (2) to disrupt or deconstruct binary categories of sex, gender, and/or sexuality; and (3) to disrupt or deconstruct any entity by rejecting its categories, binaries, or norms’.³⁹⁷ Beloved’s disruption fits all three of these definitions. Beloved is refusing to be categorised by cisnormative gender categories (and, by extension, heteronormative ideas of sexuality). And Beloved is, in so doing, disrupting and rejecting binary categories of sex, gender, and sexuality. While the focus of this thesis is on gender, it is worth noting that sexuality is unavoidably in play as part of this disruption. Lanser’s definition lists gender, sex, and sexuality as three possible structures to disrupt, but as

³⁹⁷ Lanser, ‘Queering Narrative Voice’, p. 924.

Beloved and Fitz's discussion indicates, the three are not easily separated and disrupting one can disrupt all of the others.

The whole disruption is prompted by a question of sexuality: Starling has concluded that Beloved is in love with Fitz, and that Beloved is a woman. It is difficult to clarify which of these points more disturbs Fitz; both of them, particularly in combination. Beloved's continuing refusal to conform to cisnormative gender is rendered more distressing to Fitz by their confirmation that they do love him. The text refrains from allowing this to be fully confronted at this stage, however; Beloved retreats behind humour, and both parties quietly agree to let the matter rest, neither fully conceding to the other. This stage is only the beginning.

One instance of queering in one text does not negate the impact of a history and wider context of continual Othering; however, a sole act of queering, even in a limited form, can nevertheless indicate a range of possibilities beyond the current state of the power dynamic, and in doing so becomes a first step in the process of potentially changing or even breaking down that dynamic. Most significantly, Beloved, unlike many other pre-2017 non-binary characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy, has a voice – and unlike any of them, Beloved is allowed to produce a degree of change to the status quo. Beloved's initial disruption, declaring queer existence, forces just a little more room for queerness in the narrative, something that will be built on as the series continues.

Stage Three: Tolerance

The third stage is *tolerance*, and it spans from the end of book three (*Assassin's Quest*) to near the end of book nine (*Fool's Fate*) for diagetive Fitz (therefore also applying to the extradiegetic Fitz of the first three books – see Table 4 and Table 5 for clarity).

Fitz has had his cisnormative understanding of the world disrupted by Beloved's existence, and neither he nor the narrative has erased Beloved from existence in response (see discussions in chapter two regarding the need for non-binary characters to be removed in order to resolve the narrative). However, this is far from the end of the process. Beloved's existence, declared in the previous stage, is tolerated but not accepted. While the very existence of transgender or non-binary people is disruptive to cisnormativity, cisnormativity holds a great deal of social power to respond. Susan Stryker discusses one result of this dynamic demonstrated in the United States in the mid-1960s and early 1970s:

On the other hand, as trans people seeking surgery and hormones quickly discovered, the new university-based scientific research programs were far more concerned with restabilizing the gender system, which seemed to be mutating all around them in bizarre and threatening directions, than they were with helping that cultural revolution along by further exploding mandatory relationships between sexed embodiment, psychological gender identity, and social gender role. Access to transsexual medical services thus became entangled with a socially conservative attempt to maintain traditional gender configurations in which changing sex was grudgingly permitted for the few seeking to do so, to the extent that the practice did not trouble the gender binary for the many.³⁹⁸

A certain type of queerness has been acknowledged as existing, and can be tolerated within certain bounds. This tolerance is not welcoming, it is resentful: every opportunity is taken to restrain it, restrict it, and hide it. Additionally, ways are often found to use the disruptive concept to instead reinforce cisnormativity. This historical instance, for example, leaves no room for non-binary gender, only (regulated, limited) movement between binary genders,

³⁹⁸ Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, p. 8.

further emphasising the validity of the binary over non-binary gender. In analysing the place of non-binary gender in queer and transgender theory, Jay Stewart notes that '[e]stablishing categorisations for 'abnormal behaviour' means to often draw on stereotypes, social expectations, and concepts of gender 'norms'.'³⁹⁹ In this way, the establishment of non-binary gender as a possibility, as in Beloved's depiction in 'Realm of the Elderlings', is used to reinforce the greater presumed validity of the cisnormative gender binary by comparison. Non-binary gender has been established, but it has been established as abnormal, and therefore normality must now be clearly defined. Fitz did not need to acknowledge the normality of his cisnormativity prior to Beloved's disturbance of it; but once that disturbance has taken place, there is a need for clarification of what the norm actually is.

Fitz's initial resistance to Beloved's declaration goes quiet, but he does not either fully accept Beloved or fully win the argument. Fitz's response to the challenge to his perspective is discomfort, disagreement, and confusion: 'I stared at him, at a loss for words'.⁴⁰⁰ While understanding is not necessarily a prerequisite of acceptance, Fitz's lack of understanding is so often the barrier to his acceptance of Beloved that the two function in tandem. Fitz's cisnormative (and heteronormative) framing of gender does not allow room for Beloved's perspective, and thus he lacks the vocabulary and expanse of imagination needed to directly understand or accept Beloved's argument. Therefore, Fitz persists; eventually, Starling is convinced to stop referring to Beloved as *she* and also to stop raising the subject. Fitz also appeals to Kettricken about Starling's stance: 'As to what she says of the Fool [Beloved], surely you must find it as ludicrous as I do'.⁴⁰¹ This Fitz is defensive of his view of the world and he attempts, in small ways, to enforce it – even if he cannot enforce it to the point that

³⁹⁹ Stewart, p. 59.

⁴⁰⁰ Hobb, *Assassin's Quest*, p. 631.

⁴⁰¹ Hobb, *Assassin's Quest*, p. 631.

Beloved's stance is changed, he will limit the disturbance to *only* Beloved by rejecting any support Beloved might have from other characters.

Tolerance in this sense is a delicate balance. Beloved's non-binary gender has not been successfully dismissed or destroyed – but it has not been accepted either. Beloved is instead merely tolerated, provided nothing too provocative occurs (as it will in *The Golden Fool*, discussed in the next section). Non-binary gender might exist but cisnormativity refuses to grant an equal level of complexity and reality to those that do not conform to its strictures. This type of delicately balanced tolerance can all too easily tip one way or the other – either non-binary gender becomes a greater disruption, or it is forced out. Beloved's status is unresolved as neither Fitz nor Beloved will concede to the other's stance, generating tension over how sustainable tolerance is and the perceived dangers of losing the balance. Fitz is fearful of the unknown and the Other, clinging to the stability of cisnormativity. The risk to Beloved, however, is more entangled with physical safety. Discussions in transgender studies around the mechanisms of transphobia, such as from Viviane K. Namaste, give some context for what can happen when cisnormativity is threatened. Namaste discusses the enforcement of who a given public space is believed to be for, and how homophobic violence is often related to disruption of cisnormativity. Namaste's statement that 'a perceived transgression of normative sex/gender relations motivates much of the violence against sexual minorities' is particularly pertinent, with 'perceived' being the key word.⁴⁰² The person doing the perceiving has the power, and when Beloved is perceived that person is most often Fitz – and so Fitz's defence of cisnormativity becomes the filter through which Beloved is always

⁴⁰² Viviane K. Namaste, 'Genderbashing: Sexuality, Gender, and the Regulation of Public Space', in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 584-600 (p. 585).

framed. In turn, this framework does not allow full acceptance of Beloved, only tolerance, which does not guarantee safety or security.

The same tolerance that acknowledges the existence of Beloved but denies them full acceptance exposes the power imbalance between cisgender people and transgender and non-binary people, something that will be taken a step further in the next stage: *queer insistence*.

Stage Four: Queer Insistence

The fourth stage is *queer insistence*. Beloved's queerness has been established as existing, but has been allowed to fade into the background, tolerated but not accepted. This tolerance is not a stable situation and cannot be maintained indefinitely, and in due course Beloved's queerness reemerges.

As the 'Tawny Man' trilogy progresses and Lord Golden (Beloved's newest persona) develops into a clearly identifiable character, it becomes clearer and clearer that there is more to "the Fool" than that name can refer to. Fitz's growing uncertainty comes to a head in *The Golden Fool* when he is finally confronted with the existence of Amber – and it is undoubtedly significant that of all Beloved's personae it is the most distinctly female one, Amber, that causes Fitz the most difficulty. Jek, a friend of Amber who is introduced to the reader in the 'Liveship Traders' trilogy, arrives unexpectedly during *The Golden Fool* and greets Beloved as Amber in front of Fitz. Jek also demonstrates a belief that a romantic relationship exists between Fitz and Beloved. Fitz rejects this idea in confusion and affront, and after leaving the room proceeds to eavesdrop on Beloved and Jek's conversation: '[t]here would be a reason, some driving purpose [...] I would trust my friend, but I had a right to

know what it was'.⁴⁰³ Because of this, Fitz does not see Beloved-as-Amber but is introduced to Amber through the sound of her voice, to which he reacts with considerable discomfort.

'I did not set out to do either,' said someone. And the hair on the back of my neck rose, for the voice was neither Lord Golden's nor the Fool's. This voice was lighter and devoid of any Jamaillian accent. *Amber's voice*, I surmised. Yet another façade for the person I thought I knew.⁴⁰⁴

Fitz's narration drops all gendering for the duration of the conversation that he listens in on, using no pronouns for Beloved until it ends and he reverts back to referring to the Fool and using the pronoun *he*. Fitz's distress at the revelation of the existence of Amber leads to uncertainty around all the Fool's personae, including the more recent Lord Golden:

But there was no moment of revelation awaiting. Lord Golden was real, as real as the Fool had been to me. I stood stock still a moment, reeling in that unveiling thought. Lord Golden was as real as the Fool. And hence, the Fool had been as real as Lord Golden.
So who was this man that I had known for most of my life?⁴⁰⁵

The way in which Fitz interprets Beloved – as the Fool first, and anything else second – has been thoroughly destabilised. All presentations of Beloved, and thus, multiple presentations of their gender, are now potentially valid. This destabilisation is emphasised several chapters later, when Fitz and Beloved fall into angry argument on the subject:

'You know who I am. I have even given you my true name. As for what I am, you know that, too. [...] You know more of the whole of me than any other person who breathes, yet you persist in insisting that all of that cannot be me. What would you have me cut off and leave behind? And why must I truncate myself in order to please you?'⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰³ Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 315.

⁴⁰⁴ Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 316.

⁴⁰⁵ Robin Hobb, *Fool's Errand*, (London: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 340.

⁴⁰⁶ Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 403-4.

The tolerance stage is not sustainable – and neither Fitz nor Beloved can tolerate affairs as they are any longer. This could result in the erasure of the non-binary character – if Beloved conceded to cisnormativity in some way, abandoning queerness entirely, or if Beloved was removed from the narrative (death or absence). Or, as it does here, it could result in queer insistence – a refusal to concede, and a demand for acceptance.

This is the most dramatic clash of queer and cisnormative concepts of gender seen in ‘Realm of the Elderlings’, disrupting the veneer of tolerance discussed in the previous section and revealing the transphobia inherent in cisnormative systems. In doing so, the narrative exposes ideas around deception that are intrinsic to transphobia, something analysed by Talia Mae Bettcher. Bettcher builds on Namaste’s work on the erasure of transgender people and uses discussion of a specific case (the murder of Gwen Araujo) as a way of tackling the broader question around the nature of transphobia. In doing so, she argues that transphobia frames transgender people as deceptive and uses this framework in order to vilify transgender victims and defend their attackers. This argument is central to understanding the conflict between Fitz and Beloved.

Bettcher does specify that ‘[t]he rhetoric of deception appears to apply most appropriately to people who present gender that may be construed (at least at the specific moment of transphobia) as “unambiguously” masculine or feminine [...] My account should be understood to apply in such cases rather than those involving more ambiguity’.⁴⁰⁷ This would seem to exclude non-binary gender from Bettcher’s analysis, and specifically Beloved, as ambiguity is so central to their depiction. However, in Beloved’s case, ambiguity is not their only aspect. Beloved does often present “unambiguously” (as Amber in the ‘Liveship

⁴⁰⁷ Bettcher, p. 281.

Traders' trilogy, and as Lord Golden in parts of the 'Tawny Man' trilogy), and is frequently interpreted as either cisgender female or cisgender male by other characters. These presentations are then identified as false by Fitz, particularly Amber. Beloved, in contrast, argues that these presentations are instead facets – parts of a truth, rather than lies. While Beloved has not lied to Fitz, and has in fact given Fitz the truth about themselves quite clearly, Beloved's truth is not one that is comprehensible in the framework of Fitz's cisnormativity. Fitz has managed to avoid this fact for some time, with tolerance acting as a temporary solution, but the quarrel with Beloved brings it to the centre of attention and it cannot be ignored any longer. Because Beloved's non-binary gender does not conform to what cisnormativity considers to be "truth", Fitz defends cisnormativity by instead framing Beloved as deceptive – hiding a truth that would make sense to Fitz, instead of presenting a truth that Fitz cannot accept. In doing so, Fitz is framing Beloved's identity as a wrong that Beloved has done to Fitz. Bettcher describes the rhetoric of deception as stating that 'gender presentation (attire, in particular) constitutes a gendered appearance, whereas the sexed body constitutes a hidden, sexual reality'.⁴⁰⁸ She goes on to argue that in this framing, 'genitalia play the role of "concealed truth" about a person's sex'.⁴⁰⁹ Bettcher's discussion then continues to explore how this rhetoric is used to accuse transgender people of rape, even if no sexual contact has occurred. Fitz's treatment of Beloved is not taken to this extreme, but it follows the same structure, and still results in Fitz framing Beloved's non-binary gender as deception and therefore a wrong that has been done to him.

The idea of hidden truths is central to this part of the narrative. It is not confined only to Fitz's narration, but also arises in Fitz and Beloved's spoken conversation:

⁴⁰⁸ Bettcher, p. 281.

⁴⁰⁹ Bettcher, p. 281.

You know who I am. I have even given you my true name. As for what I am, you know that too. You seek a false comfort when you demand that I define myself for you with words. Words do not contain or define any person. A heart can, if it is willing. But I fear yours is not. You know more of the whole of me than any other person who breathes, yet you persist in insisting that all of that cannot be me. What would you have me cut off and leave behind? And why must I truncate myself in order to please you? I would never ask that of you. And by those words, admit another truth. You know what I feel for you. You have known it for years. Let us not, you and I, alone here, pretend that you don't. [...] And that [Fitz's rejection], too, is a thing that we both have known for years. A thing that never needed speaking, those words that I must now carry with me for the rest of my life.⁴¹⁰

Beloved, in these words, is reframing the situation entirely. Fitz is framing his sudden destabilisation as a reveal on Beloved's part, as though Beloved has been caught in the act of deceiving. Beloved turns this back on Fitz by clarifying that no deception has taken place – instead there was ambiguity in silence, ambiguity that protected Beloved and their relationship with Fitz from the rejections required by cisnormativity. In adding this layer, the narrative raises a question over Fitz's framing of Beloved – is it, instead, Fitz who is revealing something, Fitz's internality which is exposed? The quarrel demonstrates not just Beloved's multi-faceted nature and refusal to be erased, but Fitz's closed-mindedness and cisnormativity.

Bettcher argues that transphobic hostility is 'interwoven, of course, with homophobic and possibly sexist attitudes'.⁴¹¹ This interconnection is also central to Namaste's work, a mixing of gender and sexuality that is visible in the way that a portion of Fitz's anger comes from not wanting other characters to believe him to be gay, and in his disgust with Beloved's 'unnatural desires'.⁴¹² Peter Melville discusses the quarrel specifically in the light of Fitz's homophobia, and concludes that '[c]arelessly inflicting on him the constraints of heteronormative discourse, Fitz violates the Fool's freedom to love him in his own way and

⁴¹⁰ Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, pp. 403-404.

⁴¹¹ Bettcher, p. 281.

⁴¹² Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 404.

to do so with an unspoken respect for the person he knows Fitz to be'.⁴¹³ He also describes Fitz as '[a]larmed at the candid queerness' of Beloved's declaration of affection.⁴¹⁴ This interpretation of Fitz is based directly on the clear textual framing of Fitz's behaviour as negative.

In examining this framing, I return to the narratology discussed in stage two. Once again, this time in *The Golden Fool*, we have diegetic Fitz and extradiegetic Fitz at different stages. Diegetic Fitz is at stage four, as discussed, but extradiegetic Fitz (to whom the frame narrative of this trilogy belongs) is already in the following stage: acceptance. Diegetic Fitz is in conflict with Beloved, but how this conflict is presented by extradiegetic Fitz is important. There is only one directly negative reference to diegetic Fitz's behaviour in the scene: 'So of course I made it worse as I blundered in' precedes one of diegetic Fitz's lines.⁴¹⁵ However, extradiegetic Fitz's description is not positive, either. Diegetic Fitz's feelings of anger, disgust, and lack of control are described plainly – and they are described as how diegetic Fitz *feels* rather than as the facts of the situation. In contrast, the descriptions of Beloved give them a dignity that is lacking in diegetic Fitz.⁴¹⁶ Throughout the sequence, extradiegetic Fitz's narrative subtly prioritises a demonstration of Fitz's flaws and limitations over a depiction of him as a justified and unquestioned narrative viewpoint. This allows the text to simultaneously depict and disavow cisnormative, transphobic, and homophobic attitudes to Beloved, making room for the transition to the next stage: *acceptance*.

⁴¹³ Melville, p. 293.

⁴¹⁴ Melville, p. 293.

⁴¹⁵ Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 406.

⁴¹⁶ Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, pp. 402-406.

Stage Five: Acceptance

The fifth stage is *acceptance*. Beloved's initial queer existence (stage two) resulted in tolerance, but the following queer insistence (stage four) has forced further change.

Fitz's true and full acceptance of Beloved and Beloved's gender comes primarily through grief and loss. Firstly, Fitz and Beloved's quarrel has fractured their relationship, meaning that Fitz's strident cisnormativity is no longer only hurting Beloved, but Fitz too. And secondly, Fitz's loss of Beloved in *Fool's Fate* (Beloved dies and is later brought back to life) forces Fitz to reconsider the prioritisation of his feelings – his discomfort with Beloved's gender is small when compared with the depth of his affection for them, and can therefore be more or less discarded. Fitz is then given the chance to use magic to connect mentally, emotionally, and physically with Beloved in the process of returning them to life, which completes his shift from tolerance to acceptance explicitly: 'I realized and accepted him as he was'.⁴¹⁷ This development culminates in the last discussion they have in this trilogy, in which their relationship shifts its balance and Fitz offers to travel with Beloved instead of returning to Buckkeep (an offer that Beloved refuses).

The way in which it occurs reveals much about the nature of Fitz's acceptance. Unlike the tolerance stage, in which Beloved's non-binary gender is permitted provided it does not have to be frequently acknowledged and provided the cisnormative perspective (Fitz's) does not have to change anything, the acceptance stage means that Beloved's non-binary gender is no longer a source of tension and that Fitz's grip on cisnormativity has, at minimum, loosened. Beloved's gender is no longer a point of contestation between them.

⁴¹⁷ Hobb, *Fool's Fate*, p. 634.

Firstly, as discussed in chapter three of this thesis, this shift into acceptance did not require an anatomy reveal. Halberstam's description of cisnormatively-framed media in which 'exposure as transgender constitutes the film's narrative climax' is not reflected here.⁴¹⁸ Beloved's anatomical ambiguity and privacy is preserved from the reader, even as it is likely that it is not preserved from Fitz (given that he magically inhabits Beloved's body in order to heal them). This is not merely a continuation of Beloved's own obfuscation; this is a demonstration of Fitz's new acceptance, that he preserves Beloved's privacy and ambiguity in his own writing from the curiosity from any (likely cisnormative) reader. This rejection of the cisnormative preoccupation with anatomy-based "truths", which was so fundamental to the tension of the tolerance stage, marks a drastic change in Fitz's stance as well as marking this narrative as distinctly different from other pre-2017 examples of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature.

The second element of Fitz's shift to acceptance has to do with grief, pain, and loss – and the way in which these interact with transgender narratives. A common element of the transgender narrative as told from a cisnormative perspective is the idea that cisgender parents grieve for the "loss" of their child (if their child has come out as a transgender woman, for example, the parents might express that they are mourning the loss of their son).⁴¹⁹ This grief for the child they thought they had is something discussed in psychology as an issue that can be addressed in a therapeutic setting.⁴²⁰ There is an echo of this idea in Fitz

⁴¹⁸ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Pace: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, p. 78.

⁴¹⁹ Ines Testoni and Manuela Anna Pinducciu, 'Grieving those Who Still Live: Loss Experienced by Parents of Transgender Children', *Gender Studies*, 18.1 (2020), 142-162 <<https://doi.org/10.2478/genst-2020-0011>>.

⁴²⁰ Jeni L. Wahlig, 'Losing the Child They Thought They Had: Therapeutic Suggestions for an Ambiguous Loss Perspective with Parents of a Transgender Child', *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 11.4 (2015), 305-326 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2014.945676>>.

and Beloved's quarrel; Fitz, during the prelude to the argument, refers to Beloved as 'the person I thought I knew'.⁴²¹ He then goes on to be even clearer:

I unwillingly knew I had worked my way down to the deepest source of my injury. To discover that the truest friend I had ever had was actually a stranger was like a knife in my heart. He was another abandonment, a missed step in the dark, and a false promise of warmth and companionship.⁴²²

When Fitz raises this in the quarrel, Beloved counters it directly: 'You know who I am. I have even given you my true name. As for what I am, you know that, too'.⁴²³ But Fitz continues to hold onto his reaction, and it is only when that imagined loss develops into a literal loss as Beloved is captured and murdered that Fitz shifts into acceptance.

Fitz's acceptance is distinctive, and even remarkable in the pre-2017 pseudo-medieval fantasy category, but it remains dependent on and rooted in cisnormativity and the prioritisation of cisgender perspective and experience. Fitz's cisnormativity has been inflicting harm on Beloved since the very start, but only when pain is felt by Fitz himself (causing him to lose his friendship with Beloved) does he change. This centralises the cisgender experience, and prioritises Fitz's perspective over Beloved, even as Fitz does begin to accept Beloved. Richards and others discuss the 'perhaps patronizing "interest" which situates non-binary and genderqueer people as "other" to the assumed norm of the viewer', and this is continuing to be reflected here despite the move into acceptance.⁴²⁴

Finally, Fitz's shift in perspective notably allows for not just Beloved's non-binary gender, but for an intrinsic connection between the two of them:

⁴²¹ Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 316.

⁴²² Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 321.

⁴²³ Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 403.

⁴²⁴ Christina Richards and others, 'Non-binary or genderqueer genders', p. 117-118.

For a moment, our gazes held as we mingled in unity. One person. We had always been one person. Nighteyes had voiced it long ago. It was good to be whole again. [...] And so we passed, one into the other, but for a space we had been one. The boundaries between us had melted in the mingling. *No limits*, I recalled him saying, and suddenly understood. No boundaries between us.⁴²⁵

This experience changes Fitz's priorities entirely, something that reflects the way in which gender is entangled with so many aspects of life. Butler describes this entanglement in *Gender Trouble*: 'the very injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands all at once'.⁴²⁶ Fitz's acceptance of Beloved allows him to consider and suggest breaking away from all his interconnected expectations (to be a father, a husband, a member of the royal family, etc). While this suggestion is not accepted by Beloved for other reasons, it is notable that Fitz considers it possible at all – a sign of how much has shifted in his perspective.

It would be easy to assume that acceptance is the final stage, but as 'Realm of the Elderlings' moves into the final trilogy, there are in fact three more – and the next is *queer vulnerability*.

Stage Six: Queer Vulnerability

Where can Fitz progress to from acceptance? This stage, *queer vulnerability*, and the one that follows it (*allyship*), are consequences of Fitz's acceptance. Beloved's queer disruption has worked twice to push Fitz through the stages; and now that Fitz has accepted Beloved's queerness, Beloved's vulnerability as a queer person in a cisnormative, heteronormative world is exposed. Alex Iantaffi, discussing the future of non-binary people, states that '[i]n a

⁴²⁵ Hobb, *Fool's Fate*, p. 636.

⁴²⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 199.

mainstream culture that seemingly celebrates authenticity, people with non-binary identities and expressions are often most vulnerable to violence when at their most authentic'.⁴²⁷

Beloved's authenticity is now respected by Fitz and therefore much more visible to him, with all the vulnerability that carries with it.

In many ways, Beloved has always been clearly more vulnerable than Fitz – Fitz repeatedly protects Beloved from physical harm, sometimes enduring it himself in the process, and clearly sees Beloved as less capable of defending themselves than Fitz himself is. However, at this stage, there are two subtle changes.

Firstly, while the text does not always frame Beloved's queerness as the cause of their vulnerability (the emphasis is rather on Beloved's lack of physical strength or fighting skills), their position as the only notable queer presence in Fitz's experience of the world means that the two are easily conflated in his narrative. Once Fitz has accepted Beloved's queerness instead of ignoring or tolerating it, it becomes another aspect of the Beloved that Fitz must protect and another reason that Beloved is vulnerable.

Secondly, as discussed in the previous section, Fitz's acceptance is prompted by his own pain at being estranged from them. Fitz has also, as part of this, realised that his attitude is harmful to Beloved. Post-acceptance, Fitz takes the next logical step and realises that if he is capable of harming Beloved by not accepting them, then other people who refuse to accept Beloved are also potentially harmful.

⁴²⁷ Alex Iantaffi, 'Future Directions', in *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*, ed. by Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman and Meg-John Barker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 283-296 (p. 287).

Beloved has, on many occasions through the series, needed Fitz's protection; but it is at this stage that Fitz's understanding of this protection is further informed by his acceptance of Beloved's full identity. This understanding is connected to Butler's discussion of qualifying as 'recognizably human':

This means that to the extent that desire is implicated in social norms, it is bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as the recognizably human and who does not. If I am a certain gender, will I still be regarded as part of the human? Will the "human" expand to include me in its reach? If I desire in certain ways, will I be able to live? Will there be a place for my life, and will it be recognizable to the others upon whom I depend for social existence?⁴²⁸

This series of questions is a familiar one in Fitz's own narrative, even though his gender has never been questioned. Peter Melville's paper, 'Queerness and Homophobia in Robin Hobb's Farseer Trilogies', discusses the ways in which Fitz's position as an illegitimate member of the royal family and as Witted (a person inherently capable of a specific, stigmatised type of magic) can be viewed as a queer analogue. Melville argues that Fitz's metaphorical queerness is tied up in ideas of suppression and rejection, stating that 'it is primarily Fitz's closeted experiences as a young boy at risk, yearning for an illicit, even criminalized, form of companionship for which he is taught to feel deep shame, that constitutes his status as a queer (or queer-relatable) character'.⁴²⁹ Melville then goes on to emphasise that Fitz 'comes of age at Buckkeep castle in closeted isolation, fearing the incursion of phobia-based violence, desperate for allies but daring not to "speak openly" to anyone about his desire for animal companionship'.⁴³⁰ Fitz's new acceptance of Beloved allows him to empathise, applying his own understanding of societal rejection and fear of violence to Beloved's position. Towards the end of *Fool's Fate*, Fitz observes Beloved's pain with familiarity: 'Yet the quiet that

⁴²⁸ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 3-4.

⁴²⁹ Melville, p. 284.

⁴³⁰ Melville, p. 286.

followed and fell between us [...] spoke of humiliation, and the bafflement that something done to him could make him feel shamed. I understood it too well'.⁴³¹

In order to explore this change properly, I need to simultaneously address its consequence: Fitz's move into *allyship*.

Stage Seven: Allyship

Finally, in the 'Fitz and the Fool' trilogy (the final three books of the 'Realm of the Elderlings' series), Fitz reaches the allyship stage. Specifically, diegetic Fitz's attainment of this stage is visible towards the end of *Fool's Assassin* when Beloved arrives grievously injured, and then continues to be demonstrated in *Fool's Quest* and *Assassin's Fate* particularly at points where Beloved is presenting as female. The nature of the narrative also means that extradiegetic Fitz's allyship is present in the 'Tawny Man' trilogy, as the extradiegetic Fitz of that trilogy is the diegetic Fitz of the 'Fitz and the Fool' trilogy. The allyship stage is defined by a drastic contrast with Fitz's starting point in *Assassin's Apprentice*: the non-queer character (Fitz) is not only acknowledging and accepting the queer character (Beloved) as queer, but has now recognised that the queer character needs their active support. Fitz's understanding of Beloved and Beloved's gender is no longer only a private affair between the two of them, but something that impacts Fitz's interactions with other characters. Three key points demonstrate this stage.

Firstly, the extradiegetic Fitz of the 'Tawny Man' trilogy is already demonstrating allyship by his refusal to share with the reader details of Beloved's anatomy (discovered during their revival in *Fool's Fate*) that could be used to gender them, inaccurately, according to

⁴³¹ Hobb, *Fool's Fate*, p. 642.

cisnormative rules. It is confirmed in the series that the Fitz-narrated ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ books are supposedly written *by* him, and exist within the fictional universe of the series as documents that can be read by other characters. Therefore, this act of refusal, preserving Beloved’s privacy and contributing to their carefully-crafted ambiguity, is an act of allyship. It also demonstrates Fitz’s awareness that this is a potential point of vulnerability for Beloved: without the aforesaid ambiguity, they likely would not have their identity respected by other characters.

Secondly, the diegetic (*and* extradiegetic – see Table 4) Fitz of the ‘Fitz and the Fool’ trilogy continues this allyship in his direct interactions with other characters. Close to the start of the series, in *Assassin’s Quest* (book three), there is an exchange in which Kettricken questions Fitz’s certainty of Beloved’s masculinity when he appeals to her about Starling’s declaration that Beloved is a woman:

‘[...] As to what she says of the Fool [Beloved], surely you must find it as ludicrous as I do.’
‘Should I?’ Kettricken asked me softly. ‘All I can truthfully say I know of it is that he is not a man like other men.’
‘I cannot disagree with that,’ I said quietly. ‘He is unique among all the people I have ever known.’⁴³²

In this moment, Fitz is in the third stage: tolerance. He is resentful of having to tolerate Beloved’s disruptions and insistent that his view of Beloved’s gender and of gender in general is the correct one, but Kettricken (portrayed so far in the story as wiser than Fitz on a number of subjects) is more open-minded, indicating to the reader that Fitz may be mistaken. Fitz and Kettricken do not discuss the matter again for some time – well over thirty years, in

⁴³² Hobb, *Assassin’s Quest*, p. 631.

the chronology of the story, and with a twelve-book gap in the running order – until *Fool's Quest*.

In this second conversation, Fitz has progressed through the Tolerance and Acceptance stages and into Allyship, but Kettricken remains as she is in their first conversation: more open-minded, perhaps, than others, but still grounded in cisnormative logic:

‘So. Are you finally giving a definite answer to the question Starling put to him [Beloved] so many years ago? He is, then, a man?’

I [Fitz] took a breath, paused, and then replied, ‘Kettricken, he is what he is. A very private person.’

She cocked her head at me. ‘Well, if the Fool [Beloved] had given birth to a son, I think he would remember that. So that leaves him only the male role.’

I started to say that not every child was fathered in the same way. The thought of how King Verity had borrowed my body to lie with her, leaving me for a night in his old man’s skin, swept through my mind like a storm. I folded my lips on my words and looked aside from her.⁴³³

Fitz does not double-down on his resistance, aware as he is of a complicated incident between himself and Kettricken from a previous book that renders the subject uncomfortable, but nevertheless his refusal to confirm or deny Kettricken’s guess at Beloved’s gender is a reversal of the dynamic of their conversation in *Assassin’s Quest*. These exchanges are used not merely to show a contrasting view on the subject of gender but to demonstrate Fitz’s progress between *Assassin’s Quest* and *Fool’s Quest*. He is now the character who can be relied upon to defend Beloved’s identity to others. Butler refers to the need to be ‘recognizable to the others upon whom I depend for social existence’, and this is recognisability has often been questionable for Beloved.⁴³⁴ Now, however, Fitz is able to answer alongside Beloved, and emphasise the legitimacy of Beloved’s presentation and identity. His protectiveness of Beloved initially results in him taking on some of the

⁴³³ Hobb, *Fool’s Quest*, p. 99.

⁴³⁴ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 3-4.

navigation between Beloved and other characters, as Beloved's injured state keeps them relatively isolated. Lisa Droogendyk and others, in their work on activism, discuss the dynamics of allyship (referring to allies as advantaged group activists, or AGAs) highlight the significance of this type of interaction:

Conscious recognition of one's advantaged group status and its accompanying privilege may help AGAs recognize that the cost of confronting is lower for them, and encourage them to play a special role in challenging prejudice and discrimination by members of their in-group [...] Thus, recognition of their status as an out-group member might not only remind AGAs to seek the guidance and leadership of the disadvantaged group activists, it might also remind them of their obligation and special capacity to confront in-group members who stand in the way of social change⁴³⁵

Of course, Fitz's reaction is not as formalised as what is discussed by Droogendyk et al, but the mechanic similar: confronting or standing up to other non-queer people (Kettricken) on subjects of queerness and on behalf of a queer person is part of allyship.

The third key point of Fitz's allyship comes in *Fool's Quest*, as he navigates his own feelings about Beloved presenting as female (Amber) as well as the reactions of other characters. Beloved has at this point recovered enough to be navigating social dynamics by themselves now, and so Fitz does step back. However, there are still instances in which he is faced with choices about communicating on Beloved's behalf. Particularly notable is his interaction with Perseverance – a younger character who has just discovered that his friend Ash sometimes presents as the female Spark. Though not entirely about Beloved, the conversation allows Fitz to demonstrate what he has learnt about friendship, acceptance, and allyship on the subject of gender. When Perseverance asks why Beloved and Ash/Spark (both of whom he had previously believed to be male) are presenting as female, Fitz focuses on the

⁴³⁵ Lisa Droogendyk and others, 'Acting in Solidarity: Cross-Group Contact between Disadvantaged Group Members and Advantaged Group Allies', *Journal of Social Issues*, 72.2 (2016), 315-334 (p. 328). <<https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12168>>.

conversation that Perseverance needs to have with Ash/Spark, and reflects on his own progress:

‘Why would Ash pretend to be a boy?’
‘You’d need to ask Spark about that.’
‘Spark.’ The name annoyed him. He scowled and wrapped his arms around himself.
‘I’m not going to bother. I don’t trust him any longer.’ His face set into hardness. ‘I don’t need a friend who deceives me.’
I took a deep breath and then sighed it out. There were a hundred things I could say to him. A hundred questions I could ask him that might make him see things differently. But being told something is not the same as learning it. I thought of all the things Verity had told me. Burrich’s stern advice. Patience’s counsel. But when had I learned?
‘Talk to Spark,’ I said.⁴³⁶

Fitz focuses on getting information from the person in question, prioritising the ability of Ash/Spark to self-identify over any external categorisation. He is also given a moment here to demonstrate awareness of how long it took him to pass through the stages to his current point of allyship, creating a reminder that the validity of non-binary gender is separate from cisgender perception of it. This alongside his acceptance of Beloved’s presentation as Amber without fuss, which involves him working through his disconcerted feelings privately and being outwardly supported, is a drastic change from the ignorant, resistant, and cisnormative Fitz that the series introduced in the early books. He is now demonstrating, in small ways, forms of allyship that align him more closely with the allyship advice given in several different fields, including psychology⁴³⁷, psychiatry⁴³⁸, teaching⁴³⁹, and social work.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁶ Hobb, *Fool’s Quest*, p. 658.

⁴³⁷ Christian N. Thoroughgood, Katina B. Sawyer and Jennica R. Webster, ‘Because you’re worth the risks: Acts of oppositional courage as symbolic messages of relational value to transgender employees’, *Journal of Applied Psychology* 106.3 (2021), 399-421 <<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32463260/>> [accessed 15 April 2022].

⁴³⁸ Murjan and Bouman.

⁴³⁹ Tara Goldstein and others, ‘Transitioning in elementary school: parent advocacy and teacher allyship’, *Teaching Education*, 29.2 (2018), 165-177 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2017.1372410>>.

⁴⁴⁰ J. E. Sumerau and others, ‘Constructing Allyship and the Persistence of Inequality’, *Social Problems*, 68.2 (2021), 358–373 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaa003>>.

Stage Eight: Consolidation

There is one more part of the series that is worth raising in light of Fitz's changing perspective throughout the series, and that is Fitz and Beloved's death. In the final chapters of the series, Fitz is dying, and resorts to the magical process of carving a "stone dragon" (in this case, actually an over-sized wolf in shape) for his soul to inhabit after his death. This process typically involves more than one person, and Beloved joins Fitz along with the wolf Nighteyes, resulting in the three of them becoming one being in the stone wolf. There are two particularly pertinent interpretations of this ending. Firstly, that Fitz has been queered, and secondly, that Beloved has been erased.

The first interpretation frames this melding of self as the final achievement of Beloved's queering – they have finally succeeded in not just attaining tolerance, acceptance, allyship, but the narrator himself has taken queerness (in the form of Beloved) into his very being. Fitz's continued existence must, therefore, be queer. Peggy Phelan, in her discussion of queer focalization and grief, argues that 'queer, as a critical concept, makes claims that are collective, contingent, and multiple, rather than singular, absolute, or rooted in an individual psychic subject'.⁴⁴¹ This concept is reflected in the final form of Fitz/Beloved/Nighteyes, a collective form that embodies multiple identities and facets of those identities. It is a queer ending, a collective ending, that renders them inextricable. Melville describes the ending as follows: 'Hobb concludes her series in the final pages of *Assassin's Fate* (2017) with a provocative and open-ended image of consummated union between Fitz and the Fool'.⁴⁴² He goes on to refer to the stone wolf as a 'fantastical figure of wholeness and fluidity'.⁴⁴³ This is

⁴⁴¹ Peggy Phelan, 'Hypothetical Focalization and Queer Grief', in *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, ed. by Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015), pp. 78-97 (p. 78).

⁴⁴² Melville, p. 299.

⁴⁴³ Melville, p. 300.

a queering – Fitz and Beloved have a ‘consummated union’ analogous to a marriage of some kind, and finally become whole while remaining fluid.⁴⁴⁴ Beloved’s questions in *The Golden Fool*, ‘What would you have me cut off and leave behind? And why must I truncate myself in order to please you?’ are now unnecessary, because they and Fitz are both now open to one another in their entirety, forever.⁴⁴⁵

I have described this collective ending as a success, but it also echoes Halberstam’s concept of queer failure. Heather Love states that ‘same-sex desire is marked by a long history of association with failure, impossibility and loss’.⁴⁴⁶ Halberstam then builds on this to argue that ‘For Love, queer bodies function within a psychoanalytic framework as the bearers of the failure of all desire; if, in a Lacanian sense, all desire is impossible, impossible because unsustainable, then the queer body and queer social worlds become the evidence of that failure, while heterosexuality is rooted in a logic of achievement, fulfilment, and success(ion)’.⁴⁴⁷ The end of Fitz’s story is not a heteronormative, cishnormative narrative of traditional succession – if it were, the series would have had to end with *Fool’s Fate* in which Fitz is left to marry his childhood sweetheart (Molly) and settle down. Instead, that ending is disrupted, first by the death of Molly, and second by the arrival of Beloved and those who preceded them, bringing danger and chaos back into Fitz’s life. While both of Fitz and Molly’s children survive, the first (Nettle) is estranged from him, and the second (Bee) owes some of her prophetic ability to Fitz’s earlier magical entanglement with Beloved, making her the child of Fitz and Molly but also Beloved, whom she simultaneously rejects and also causes to join Fitz in his final transformation. The queer disruptions to Fitz’s life – the queer

⁴⁴⁴ Melville, p. 299.

⁴⁴⁵ Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 403-404.

⁴⁴⁶ Heather Love, *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 21

⁴⁴⁷ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 94.

social world he participates in by dint of his friendship with Beloved – are mirrored directly by losses in his heteronormative and cisnormative expected life. If Beloved is present in any significant way, Molly is absent (indeed the two characters never directly interact); Fitz and Beloved’s closeness also is a point of contention between Fitz and another heteronormative love interest, Starling. Fitz ends *Fool’s Fate* with a description of near-idyllic life with Molly and the children, and the words ‘*I am content*’, but this cannot be permitted to last.⁴⁴⁸ It must fail; and Halberstam’s idea that ‘[u]nder certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world’ is echoed in the ways in which Fitz’s cis- and hetero-normative life is twisted into new shapes, eventually resulting in his generation of the queer, multi-faceted being that he dies to become.⁴⁴⁹

The second interpretation of this ending is that Beloved has been absorbed into Fitz, effectively disappearing, erasing the queerness from the story. This would mirror the pattern discussed in chapter one of this thesis in which the queer character must be removed in order for the story to resolve, as their disruption is not compatible with closure. The final form of Fitz/Beloved/Nighteyes is a wolf-shape, a symbol that has belonged very strongly to Fitz throughout the series; this transformation is achieved through Fitz’s magic and Fitz’s strength, with Beloved included only towards the very end of the process and only *able* to be included because of their magical connection to Fitz himself. In many ways, Beloved’s distinct identity is subsumed into a shared identity that most closely resembles Fitz and Nighteyes, with little to indicate their part in it. The wolf may be a combination of the three of them, but leaves nothing of Beloved visible. Moreover, the focus of the ending scenes is

⁴⁴⁸ Hobb, *Fool’s Fate*, p. 805.

⁴⁴⁹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 2-3.

on Fitz – the transformation is achieved surrounded by Fitz’s family and friends, with Fitz’s daughter Bee (who actively dislikes Beloved) taking over the narrative as Fitz can no longer speak for himself. This narrative choice inevitably side-lines Beloved, treating them as a trivial addition rather than central to the process.

Both possible interpretations are strong, and I would argue that in fact both are true: the text is fundamentally ambiguous towards the end, leaving multiple possibilities open, particularly as we lose access to Fitz’s voice as his narrative disappears. This evokes, once more, Peggy Phelan’s work on queer grief:

Insofar as narratology is dedicated to meta-understanding, to describing how it is we come to understand narratives, it necessarily comports with the *might have been* that haunts reading fiction as a mode of cognitive and affective action. Queer theorists, to speak very broadly, have been all about the epistemological and affective consequences of doubt and uncertainty: indeed, some of the most subtle and influential work in the field concerns shame, trauma, optimism, love, and grief, emotional fields that emerge primarily through grammars of affective doubt.⁴⁵⁰

Fitz and Beloved’s ending is one that leaves questions about truth, about love, and the meaning of wholeness, never fully answering them but remaining open to multiple interpretations that speak to queerness and possibility.

Impact

As is now clear, the nature of Fitz’s narrative means that while both extradiegetic Fitz and diegetic Fitz are progressing through the above stages, they are not lined up with each other. Rather, they move through the stages at different paces, which in turn impacts the double lens through which Beloved is viewed:

⁴⁵⁰ Phelan, pp. 82-83.

Table 5: Fitz's progression through 'Realm of the Elderlings'

No.	Book Title	Trilogy	Diegetic Fitz	Extradiegetic Fitz
1	<i>Assassin's Apprentice</i>	'Farseer'	Initial Assumptions	Tolerance
2	<i>Royal Assassin</i>	'Farseer'	Initial Assumptions	Tolerance
3	<i>Assassin's Quest</i>	'Farseer'	Queer Existence	Tolerance
3	<i>Assassin's Quest</i>	'Farseer'	Tolerance	Tolerance
7	<i>Fool's Errand</i>	'Tawny Man'	Tolerance	Acceptance
8	<i>The Golden Fool</i>	'Tawny Man'	Queer Insistence	Acceptance
9	<i>Fool's Fate</i>	'Tawny Man'	Tolerance	Acceptance
9	<i>Fool's Fate</i>	'Tawny Man'	Acceptance	Acceptance
14	<i>Fool's Assassin</i>	'Fitz and the Fool'	Queer Vulnerability	Allyship
14	<i>Fool's Assassin</i>	'Fitz and the Fool'	Allyship	Allyship
15	<i>Fool's Quest</i>	'Fitz and the Fool'	Allyship	Allyship
16	<i>Assassin's Fate</i>	'Fitz and the Fool'	Allyship	Allyship
16	<i>Assassin's Fate</i>	'Fitz and the Fool'	Consolidation	Consolidation

Throughout the series, it is this contrast between diegetic and extradiegetic Fitz that allows questioning of Fitz's narrative authority. Extradiegetic Fitz is often considering his diegetic (younger) self's behaviour and attitudes from his later position. For example, during his quarrel with Beloved in *The Golden Fool* we hear extradiegetic Fitz (at the Acceptance stage) quite clearly condemning the behaviour of his diegetic self (Tolerance/Queer Insistence): 'So of course I made it worse as I blundered in'.⁴⁵¹ When this contrast is layered on top of his interpretation of Beloved, it impacts the way Beloved's non-binary gender is depicted at a fundamental level.

⁴⁵¹ Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 406.

By having extradiegetic Fitz recognise his diegetic perspective's flaws, the narrative allows room to demonstrate a concept of gender (Beloved's) which is different from the cisnormative standard but yet has equal validity in that universe – Beloved's gender is not framed as impossible or incorrect but instead an alternative that is simply beyond at least diegetic Fitz's understanding. In other words, Beloved's gender may confuse Fitz – to the point that the diegetic Fitz of *Assassin's Quest*, for example, initially refuses to engage with the idea at all – but because of the contrasts between diegetic Fitz, extradiegetic Fitz, and Beloved, the text encourages the questioning of Fitz's stance and posits that Beloved's gender is valid despite Fitz's inability to comprehend it. This evokes Butler's discussions of cultural intelligibility again, though in this case the way Beloved is framed is a challenge to it. Beloved's authenticity is not dependent on their intelligibility to Fitz, on Fitz's agreement or understanding, despite Fitz's position as primary perspective – and it is the way in which the narrative is structured that allows this to be so.

It is also key that the contrast created is not a stable one, but one that undergoes change as Fitz progresses in his understanding of Beloved. This is distinct from Melville's framing of Fitz as a queer analogue; instead, this is Fitz becoming gradually more open to non-cisnormative possibilities. Lanser's analysis accounts for different types of queer narration, but not one that shifts in this way – Fitz is not a queer narrator, but over the course of the 'Realm of the Elderlings' his perspective is gradually queered – and at most points of the series, diegetic Fitz is echoed by the queerer extradiegetic Fitz. Queer in 'Realm of the Elderlings' is a verb, a process. This opens up more possibilities as to what constitutes a queer narrative – if the queer in Fitz's narrative originates not from Fitz himself but from

Beloved, and the way Beloved and Fitz's developing relationship gradually shifts Fitz's view of the world, particularly his understanding of gender.

This gradual shift has a similar effect to an aspect of 'Realm of the Elderlings' discussed in chapter three: the depiction of contrasting gender norms in one fictional universe with multiple cultures. As this depiction of contrast reveals the fundamentally constructed nature of said gender norms, so the gradual shift in Fitz's perspective and the contrast between diegetic and extradiegetic Fitz's standpoint reveals the instability and lack of universality of cisnormativity. This has the effect of undermining the legitimacy of a cisnormative framing, positing new possibilities, challenging the reader, and pivoting a portion of the power from Fitz to Beloved.

Halberstam's work on the idea of queer failure is significant to this analysis. Halberstam posits that queerness is, by the definitions of a non-queer society, a failure, and that that failure is worth pursuing and validating: '[u]nder certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world'.⁴⁵² Queerness in 'Realm of the Elderlings', in the form of the gradual queering of Fitz's perspective, is not only framed positively but as necessary for growth and Fitz's wellbeing. This change in the way that Fitz exists in the world is framed as wisdom, something he can pass on to younger individuals in his community, as well as a way to allow for relationships that were limited or impossible before. However, this positive framing of queerness still has its own limits. The cisnormative character remains the central focus of the narrative, the priority is on his development and wellbeing (or lack thereof) rather than that of the queer character – Beloved is only able to

⁴⁵² Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 2-3.

queer the narrative through Fitz's extremely grudging permission, and never controls the narrative themselves. The disruption of cisnormativity is only permitted in a carefully controlled manner, largely dependent on the choices of cisgender Fitz. Queering is occurring simultaneously with the prioritising of the cisnormative default.

While this queering achieves a change to the dominant narrative perspective, it is not permitted to fully alter the wider social and cultural norms of the fictional setting. Beloved is granted room for themselves, and may challenge those assumptions and behaviours that restrict them directly, but is forced to remain an exception. Beloved's act of queering is one that is permitted by a representative of the dominant cultural norm, as well as being contained and perhaps even made "safe" for cisgender consumption by its enshrinement in Fitz's perspective, Fitz's confusion, and the unchanging cis- and heteronormative culture of the setting. These limits complicate the nature of this act of queering, but given the otherwise barren context of pseudo-medieval fantasy literature in terms of non-binary representation, I would argue that they do not entirely undermine it nor diminish its significance.

Beloved stands as the only example of a major non-binary character that I have found in the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre pre-2017, and while Beloved's presence demonstrates the possibilities available to queer characters in that genre they are nevertheless limited. In most other examples of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature (discussed in chapters one and two), non-binary representation starts and stops with Othering. Beloved initially appears to conform to this trend, but that quickly changes. The greater complexity around Beloved's depiction – diegetic Fitz and extradiegetic Fitz, the progress through stages and their contrasts – contributes to a portrayal of non-binary gender that is much more sophisticated and detailed, not to mention granted more dignity, than the portrayals in the

other pseudo-medieval fantasy examples pre-2017. Simultaneously, the narrative is told by a cisgender character, and Beloved is viewed only through a cisgender perspective, which limits the depiction of queerness considerably – especially in contrast to the texts in 2017 onwards, such as Linsey Miller’s ‘Mask of Shadows’ duology, in which the non-binary character is the narrative voice.

This uneasy combination positions ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ in a fulcrum position, marking the shift in the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre as it responds to societal change around attitudes to transgender and non-binary people. It also is echoed by Beloved herself, a character crossing boundaries, questioning expectations, and disrupting cultural norms. In the final part of this chapter, I am going to look at Beloved’s narrative role in ‘Realm of the Elderlings’, and the ways in which Beloved evokes the trickster figure.

Beloved: Narrative Role and the Trickster Figure

Trickster figures are typically folk heroes, whose position on or around a boundary challenges societal norms. They are typically foolish figures with some unexpected wisdom, and the way they are depicted will depend on the cultural context that they are created in, making it a very broad category. In this section I will be centring Lewis Hyde’s *Trickster Makes This World* as well as work by Jeanne Rosier Smith in order to understand the nature of a trickster figure and how it relates to the depiction of Beloved in ‘Realm of the Elderlings’.

I am going to focus on two particular elements of the trickster figure in this thesis: the idea of boundary crossing, and the idea of changeability. These two things inevitably intersect, of

course. Both Hyde's work and Smith's work highlight the importance of boundary crossing to the trickster figure; Smith states that:

In virtually all cultures, tricksters are both folk heroes and wanderers on the edges of the community, at once marginal and central to the culture. Tricksters challenge the status quo and disrupt perceived boundaries. Whether foolishly, arrogantly, or bravely, tricksters face the monstrous, transforming the chaotic to create new worlds and new cultures.⁴⁵³

In this description, the overlap with boundary crossing and changeability is clear – our trickster is 'at once marginal and central' and can be seen 'transforming the chaotic'.⁴⁵⁴

Hyde's description of this flexibility is similar:

'boundary creation and boundary crossing are related to one another, and the best way to describe trickster is to say simply that the boundary is where he will be found – sometimes drawing the line, sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing it or moving it, but always there, the god of the threshold in all its forms.'⁴⁵⁵

Hyde later explains that '[t]hus is trickster and thus is the polytropic man, shifty as an octopus, coloring himself to fit his surroundings, putting on a fresh face for each man or woman he meets, charming, disarming, and not to be trusted'.⁴⁵⁶ This idea of the trickster is centred around change and disruption as well as deceit, which when applied to a non-binary character does evoke some of the transphobic deceit narratives that I have already discussed, and I will therefore be returning to the work of Talia Mae Bettcher in this section.

Although the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre does feature non-binary characters as explored in chapters one and two of this thesis, it is clear at this stage that the portrayal of Beloved is somewhat unusual. In contrast to the previously addressed examples from the genre, Beloved

⁴⁵³ Jeanne Rosier Smith, *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 2. UC Press E-Books Collection.

⁴⁵⁴ Smith, p. 2.

⁴⁵⁵ Hyde, p. 7-8.

⁴⁵⁶ Hyde, p. 53.

moves in and out of significance, from minor character ('Liveship Traders') to major character ('Tawny Man') to absent influence ('Rain Wild Chronicles') to major character again ('Fitz and the Fool'). This makes their key position somewhat unusual; while, like many previously-discussed non-binary characters, they are "hidden" in the text (never a first person narrator or given a third-person narrative perspective, not identified as important at the very start of any of the sub-series) they also hold a position that is undoubtedly key to the overarching plot (referred to in book and trilogy titles, influencing the decisions of other characters, identifying primary opponents, and being the only character with any understanding of where the story is going). Beloved's significance to the fundamental framework of the story is therefore much greater than the other examples of non-binary gender characters found in pseudo-medieval fantasy texts. This significant positioning has the benefit of allowing much more room for Beloved to develop into a complex and detailed character than is available in texts containing the previously discussed examples.

However, Beloved is not the protagonist of any individual book or trilogy in 'Realm of the Elderlings', their significance to the story is always superseded by Fitz's, and they do not hold the narrative viewpoint at any time, distinguishing them from the protagonists of Ember's *The Tiger's Watch* and Miller's 'Mask of Shadows'. Beloved's significance is to the narrative arc of the entire series – the prophet and catalyst story, which I will explain below in more detail – and is framed as the protagonist of a story happening outside the story that Fitz tells.

The shifting nature of Beloved's narrative role, the different positions that they take, and the way in which those narrative roles impact the story and other characters – all of these things combine to evoke the trickster figure throughout Beloved's contributions to the narrative. I

am firstly going to address each of Beloved's different roles within the narrative one by one: the protagonist of a wider story, an agent of change, a guide, and a love interest. Then I will examine the effect of these in combination.

Protagonist of a Wider Story

Beloved appears, as the Fool in the 'Farseer' trilogy, to be tangential to the main plot. They play a small part (as a guide, largely – see below) in helping Fitz, but they are rarely instrumental in any particular incident. However, it gradually becomes apparent that Beloved is fundamental to the overarching plot of the series.

It is Beloved's conflict with the Servants and their associates (such as the Pale Woman) that drives the overarching plot: the events of the 'Farseer' trilogy are, we discover later in the series, orchestrated by the Pale Woman, as are the events of the 'Tawny Man' trilogy, and the 'Fitz and the Fool' trilogy then follows a much more direct confrontation between the Servants and Beloved. The 'Livship Traders' trilogy and the 'Rain Wild Chronicles' are less directly connected, but nevertheless the events they depict are dependent on Beloved's actions. Beloved can therefore be considered the central character or even a protagonist in their own right when the series is viewed as a whole.

In this way, Beloved becomes Fitz's point of entry for a wider world – Beloved, standing on the border between Fitz's initial story (one illegitimate member of the royal family, embroiled in a war between two nations) and a story of much greater scale (the prophet who is paired with a catalyst to change the course of the future for the entire world). The latter story belongs to Fitz and Beloved both, as the prophet and catalyst myth requires they work in conjunction.

Weinbaum and Smith describe trickster figures as ‘at once marginal and central to the culture’, and Beloved echoes this in their placement within the plot, being typically marginal to Fitz’s life but simultaneously central to all its major events.⁴⁵⁷ Hyde refers to the trickster figure as ‘the spirit of the doorway leading out’, another description that is echoed by Beloved’s narrative role.⁴⁵⁸ Beloved leads Fitz out of his relatively limited understanding of the world on multiple levels – on a plot level, Beloved leads Fitz to consider the wider scale impact of his actions:

You. Or not you. Linchpin, anchor, knot in the line. I have seen the end of the world, Fitz. Seen it woven as plainly as I’ve seen my birth. Oh, not in your lifetime, nor even mine. But shall we be happy, to say that we live in the dusk rather than in the full night? Shall we rejoice that we shall only suffer, while your offspring will be the ones to know the torments of the damned? Shall this be why we do not act?⁴⁵⁹

Additionally, as discussed above, Beloved leads Fitz out of his limited, hetero- and cis-normative world and into a world of wider possibilities. The two actions parallel one another, in doing so emphasising themselves. Beloved is positioned as Fitz’s route of escape to something larger and broader than his cultural norms and social position would ever allow for, in terms of both his significance to the events of his world and his understanding of gender and sexuality.

This trickster figure aspect of Beloved is intertwined with another: Beloved’s role as an agent of change.

⁴⁵⁷ Smith, p. 2.

⁴⁵⁸ Hyde, p. 6.

⁴⁵⁹ Hobb, *Royal Assassin*, p. 339.

Agent of Change

Beloved does not only exist on the border between smaller scale plot/larger scale plot, between cisnormative and not; they actively push Fitz (and parts of the plot) into motion, and enact change through Fitz. This is the nature of the prophet and catalyst relationship:

Beloved, as the prophet, sees the possibilities of the future, and either tells Fitz directly or manipulates Fitz's circumstances in order to have Fitz influence the future in a particular direction. Beloved's arrival in any given trilogy is an indicator that if the main action of the plot has not begun yet, it is about to; and if it has, that it is about to become more complex. Beloved, with Fitz, is a source of change.

This is an aspect of the trickster figure that Beloved embodies with Fitz as well as for Fitz – in the prophet and catalyst mechanism, Beloved describes their own role as a comparatively passive one, unable to enact change on the world without Fitz's participation: 'I have always needed my Catalyst to accomplish anything'.⁴⁶⁰ Given that Beloved's actions directly cause Fitz's as well as those of other characters on several occasions, this claim seems somewhat contradictory. However, as prophet and catalyst Fitz and Beloved are not easily separated, nor is their exact dynamic ever precisely pinned down by the text. Beloved, then, enacts change but only through other characters.

Weinbaum and Smith argue that 'tricksters face the monstrous, transforming the chaotic to create new worlds and new cultures'.⁴⁶¹ Beloved rarely directly faces down any major antagonist, preferring to manoeuvre Fitz into that position, but nevertheless takes these situations as transformative opportunities. Beloved's stated goal is the return of dragons to

⁴⁶⁰ Hobb, *Fool's Quest*, p. 722.

⁴⁶¹ Smith, p. 2.

the world, which they achieve partly through Fitz and partly through their manipulation of events in the 'Liveship Traders' trilogy; this return drastically changes the nature of the world, as it involves the creation of new nations, drastic shifts in social norms, and adjustments as humans learn to accommodate a second intelligent species besides themselves.

Guide

"Guide" in this context is a broad term, bringing together several different aspects of guidance and support that Beloved provides. As prophet, Beloved guides many of the major events of the plot from behind the scenes; as discussed above, Beloved functions as a guide to wider possibilities for Fitz, both in the scale of his understanding of the world and in options other than cis- and hetero-normativity. Beloved also often acts as an advisor, an information source, and conversely a source of mystery.

Beloved's version of guidance actually parts ways from Hyde's vision of a trickster, as Hyde focuses a significant portion of his work on the trickster as a liar: 'In fact, we must now add creative lying to our list of trickster's inventions. Trickster discovers creative fabrication, feigning, and fibbing, the playful construction of fictive worlds. It is trickster who invents the gratuitous untruth'.⁴⁶² Beloved, in counter, is rarely if ever revealed to have been lying; his quarrel with Fitz in *The Golden Fool*, they defend themselves against Fitz's accusations of deception by arguing that all elements of themselves are truthful. Beloved is the source of truth about the future, even when their knowledge is vague; but while they do not tend to lie, they are not beyond concealing or obfuscating the truth in order to achieve an effect: '[w]ould you

⁴⁶² Hyde, p. 45.

listen to me if I came to you and did not speak in riddles? Would that make you pause and think and hang upon every word, and ponder those words later, in your chamber?'.⁴⁶³

Beloved's guidance is a shifting thing, moving from the direct to the indirect, the certain to the uncertain. Their knowledge of the future is central to their role as prophet, but it comes to them in small hints, and therefore does as much to demonstrate the uncertainty of upcoming events as it does to foreshadow them. This shiftiness and changeability is also reflected in the number of different guiding roles that Beloved takes throughout the series: carer for Shrewd, assistant with Kettricken's escape, guide to presenting male for the runaway Althea, source of interpersonal advice for several different characters, and of course the varying forms of guidance provided to Fitz. Indeed, some of Beloved's ability to guide other characters derives directly from this changeability, which has enabled their support to be accepted by so many different characters and permitted them a greater breadth of experience to draw upon. In turn, Beloved's uncertainty and fallibility allows them to retain more depth and complexity than previous non-binary guide characters such as Martin's Sweets or Nicholson's Jumper. Returning to Hyde's concept of the trickster as the deceitful 'polytropic man', Beloved is markedly distinct from the trickster in this way.⁴⁶⁴ Beloved, in different personae, finds positions of trust and influence, though often in unconventional ways. They also explicitly connect this ability to their changing personae. Beloved states that as Amber 'all felt free to speak to me'.⁴⁶⁵ And when discussing Starling's belief that they are a woman in *Assassin's Quest*, Beloved suggests that '[p]erhaps it was easier for her to [confide in Beloved] if she believed I was a woman, also'.⁴⁶⁶ However, as we will see in the next narrative role, this does not allow Beloved to entirely escape accusations of deceit and untrustworthiness.

⁴⁶³ Hobb, *Royal Assassin*, p. 223.

⁴⁶⁴ Hyde, p. 53.

⁴⁶⁵ Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 403.

⁴⁶⁶ Hobb, *Assassin's Quest*, p. 634.

Love Interest

It is made explicitly clear in *The Golden Fool* that Beloved is in love with Fitz. Beloved makes fairly frank statements to that effect as early as *Assassin's Quest* that Fitz nevertheless finds ways to dismiss (usually as part of Beloved's court-jester-style teasing and mockery). Fitz's rejection of this idea is firm throughout the 'Farseer' trilogy and most of the 'Tawny Man' trilogy, only lifting with Beloved's death and magical resurrection at the end of *Fool's Fate* as Fitz accepts Beloved as they are.

This positions Beloved as a spurned love interest. They cannot succeed as a love interest, initially because Fitz's deep-rooted cis- and hetero-normativity refuses to even consider it: 'I would never... do you understand me? I could never desire you as a bed partner. Never'.⁴⁶⁷

This conflict is one of the main sources of Fitz and Beloved's most significant estrangement in the series, the quarrel in *The Golden Fool*, as Fitz objects to other characters perceiving himself and Beloved as romantically involved and blames Beloved for this occurring. This returns us to narratives of deception, as Fitz frames Beloved as lying to other characters about their relationship.

Hyde does not consider the trickster as a love interest at all, but does have this to say about tricksters and deception: 'When he lies and steals, it isn't so much to get away with something or get rich as to disturb the established categories of truth and property and, by doing so, open the road to possible new worlds'.⁴⁶⁸ Beloved is not lying directly to anyone, at most leaving certain truths unspoken and not challenging misconceptions. But where Beloved

⁴⁶⁷ Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 404.

⁴⁶⁸ Hyde, p. 53.

realigns with Hyde's description is that in doing so they absolutely 'disturb the established categories of truth', breaking open the limits of Fitz's world and pulling Fitz forward into considering new possibilities.

As a spurned love interest, Beloved is once again existing on a border, demonstrating what is beyond it. Molly, Fitz's desired love interest (mother of his children and for a time his wife), occupies a similar role, even though she does not meet Fitz's rejection the way that Beloved does. Fitz's many secrets as a former assassin separate the two of them, and their most significant time together takes place between two trilogies – once the plot of a trilogy begins, there is little to no room for her. Both Molly and Beloved offer possibilities that Fitz cannot fully accept for most of his life, and when he does it is conditional or temporary: his contented life with Molly after the 'Tawny Man' trilogy ends with her death, and his joining with Beloved for the stone wolf in *Assassin's Fate* never confirms the nature of their relationship between them (see the discussion in the 'Consolidation' section above).

The Trickster's Changing Roles

Multiplicity is a major feature of Beloved's character. In addition to the multiple narrative roles described above, they have multiple facets to their personality (Beloved, Fool, Amber, Lord Golden, Lord Gray), multiple positions within their fictional society (White Prophet, toymaker, court jester, foreign nobility, woodcarver), and of course multiple different interpretations of them by Fitz and other characters.

This changeability returns us to Hyde's polytropic man, the trickster figure who when combined with Beloved evokes some of the work by Bettcher and Namaste on transphobia:

Thus is trickster and thus is the polytropic man, shifty as an octopus, coloring himself to fit his surroundings, putting on a fresh face for each man or woman he meets, charming, disarming, and not to be trusted.⁴⁶⁹

The concept of Beloved as polytropic in the way that Hyde describes is firmly entangled with Beloved's non-binary gender. Both Beloved's non-binary gender and their changeability are at least partially demonstrated through the fact of Beloved's multiple personae – their changeability as well as their non-binary gender can be seen in their many names and modes of presentation. It is strengthened by a more general connection outside of the text: as discussed above, some common negative perceptions of transgender and non-binary people frame them, as Halberstam states, as 'duplicitous, deceptive, odd'.⁴⁷⁰ Halberstam's examination of the narratives created around transgender lives focuses on the ways in which these ideas of deception arise from not merely the existence of cisnormativity as a possibility, but from the insistence that cisnormativity is the only "truthful" framework. If this is believed to be the case, then a cisnormative perspective is prioritised over a non-cisnormative one even if this is in direct opposition to the self-understanding of the trans or non-binary individual. This concept is echoed in 'Realm of the Elderlings' during the build up to the quarrel between Fitz and Beloved in *The Golden Fool*, where Fitz asks, 'who was this man that I had known for most of my life?'.⁴⁷¹ This specific type of uncertainty that Fitz has around Beloved arises again during the quarrel itself: 'None of it was real. I've never know you at all, have I?'.⁴⁷²

Throughout this, the idea of deception is closely examined, eventually leading to Fitz's conclusion that '[y]ou are you. Fool, Lord Golden, Amber, and Beloved. You are you, and

⁴⁶⁹ Hyde, p. 53.

⁴⁷⁰ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Pace: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, p. 57.

⁴⁷¹ Hobb, *Fool's Errand*, p. 340.

⁴⁷² Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 403.

we know one another as well as any two people can’, an understanding that rejects entirely the previously discussed negative concept of non-binary gender and allows for a more all-inclusive interpretation.⁴⁷³ Hyde states that ‘[w]ith some polytropic characters it is possible that there is no real self behind the shifting masks, or that the real self lies exactly there, in the moving surfaces and not beneath’ continuing to describe these sorts of characters as ‘beings with no way of their own, only the many ways of their shifting skins and changing contexts’.⁴⁷⁴ Beloved’s depiction contrasts with this, particularly as Fitz’s understanding of them develops – Beloved’s real self may indeed lie in the moving circumstances, but they are not a being with no way of their own. Instead, their multiple facets are purposeful, adaptive, and demonstrate a set of goals separate from those of the other characters in their role as the protagonist of a wider story.

Beloved’s awareness of the purposefulness of these roles is particularly interesting. Beloved states they travelled to Buckkeep (the location of the events of the first book) initially to find their ‘place in history’ and take up their destined role.⁴⁷⁵ They change this role as their circumstances and plans demand: ‘I became Amber because she most suited my purpose and needs [...] Just as Lord Golden fulfils them now’.⁴⁷⁶ By demonstrating Beloved’s self-awareness in taking up not just different personae but also different functional roles in the events of the series, an extra dimension is added to Beloved’s character that evokes the importance of self-identification in transgender and non-binary communities. Beloved’s self-awareness is, in this way, used to stand in for the actual internally-constructed identity that cannot be replicated entirely by a fictional character – it grants emphasis to the prioritisation of Beloved’s understanding of their own non-binary gender over the interpretation of that

⁴⁷³ Hobb, *Fool’s Quest*, p. 721.

⁴⁷⁴ Hyde, p. 54.

⁴⁷⁵ Hobb, *Royal Assassin*, p. 336.

⁴⁷⁶ Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 402-403.

gender by other, cisgender characters. This in turn underlines Beloved's primary argument in response to Fitz's accusations of deceit:

You know more of the whole of me than any other person who breathes, yet you persist in insisting that all of that cannot be me. What would you have me cut off and leave behind? And why must I truncate myself in order to please you? I would never ask that of you.⁴⁷⁷

In this, in a sense, we see a strong and articulate rebuke to Hyde's concept of the 'polytropic man' which previously seemed so fitting, the person who is 'charming, disarming, and not to be trusted'.⁴⁷⁸ Instead, we see a character who is fighting to have recognised what is described by Šporčič: 'that non-binary gender identities elude categorisation and refuse to exist within the (never adequately justified, yet nevertheless prevalent) polarised dichotomy of male and female'.⁴⁷⁹ It is a defiant claim, and not one that is permitted to most other non-binary characters in the pre-2017 examples that I have examined. Beloved eludes categorisation, refusing to be reduced to either male or female, refusing to bow to Fitz's cisnormativity, instead gradually moving the dial towards acceptance, then allyship.

Beloved's relationship with the trickster figure is a complex one, both strongly evoking it and also pushing against it. Beloved rejects the idea of deception by re-framing it as lack of comprehension from a cisnormative perspective – not a lie, but a truth that erodes and disrupts that boundaries previously seen as immovable. This melting or dissolving of boundaries also once again evokes the idea of the line-crossing trickster figure and what Hyde refers to as 'the insight that comes to all boundary crossers [...] that meaning is contingent and identity fluid, even the meaning and identity of one's own body'.⁴⁸⁰ At the

⁴⁷⁷ Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p. 403-404.

⁴⁷⁸ Hyde, p. 53.

⁴⁷⁹ Šporčič, p. 64.

⁴⁸⁰ Hyde, p. 172.

same time, the deceptiveness of the trickster figure as the polytropic man is examined and dismantled.

In summation, Beloved is a trickster figure, something which is established partially directly and partially through the different roles they take in the narrative. Simultaneously, the depiction of Beloved's character critiques the trickster figure and argues against it. This is part of what allows Beloved's non-binary gender to be expressed with much greater complexity and sophistication than those of the other characters in pre-2017 texts, but it is also part of what limits it in comparison with the texts from 2017 onwards.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the key to the unusual nature of Beloved's depiction is the perspective in which they are framed. This perspective begins as cisnormative and experiences a slow queering as the series progresses, in a way which resembles discussions of queer allyship in several different fields of research. I examined this process by dividing it into eight stages and engaging with critical work on queer narratology, the mechanics of transphobia, queer allyship, and Halberstam's concept of queer failure. I have then gone on to analyse Beloved's narrative role in light of this shifting perspective, and consider how it interacts with work on the trickster figure, particularly Hyde's concept of the 'polytropic man'.⁴⁸¹

I have, at this point in my thesis, established that Beloved is distinctly different from the other examples of non-binary characters in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature – in many ways a more developed, more complex, and more sophisticated fictional creation. However,

⁴⁸¹ Hyde, p. 53.

Beloved's character also has its limitations, and the most significant of these is the fact that they are presented entirely from a cisgender perspective. The restrictions of Beloved's narrative position contrast with the clear protagonist roles of Ember's Tashi (*The Tiger's Watch*) and Miller's Sal ('Mask of Shadows'). This is one example of the way in which Beloved's presentation appears to be almost a stepping stone, a transitional stage, between the obscured and inhuman non-binary characters discussed in chapters one and two and the complex, highly-developed non-binary protagonists of the texts published from 2017 onwards.

'Realm of the Elderlings', in this way, finds itself standing alone in the genre. The depiction of Beloved is much more sophisticated than any other pre-2017 example of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature, but it nevertheless fails to fully extricate itself from a context of cis- and hetero-normative culture that is fundamentally uncomfortable with queer disruption.

Conclusion: Non-Binary Futures in Pseudo-Medieval Fantasy Beyond 2017

At the beginning of my research process, I had many questions about the presentation of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature: were there any non-binary characters at all? If so, in which texts were they found, and in what manner were they presented? What implications did these presentations have? In order to investigate these questions, I focused my research on two main, overlapping areas: a broad analysis of non-binary gender depictions in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature from 1990-2017, as found in chapters one and two; and a case study on Beloved from Robin Hobb's 'Realm of the Elderlings' series, as found in chapters three and four. I approached both sides of my analysis through the lens of queer and trans theory, with some reference to feminist theory and fantasy studies. My analysis of a broad range of texts gave me an understanding of the paucity of non-binary characters in the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre as well as the limitations on them when they do appear; approaching that analysis in a chronological fashion allowed me to consider this in light of contemporary developments in transgender and non-binary activism. Using Beloved, a rare non-binary character permitted complexity and depth, as a case study was very valuable. I found Beloved to be both an enlightening demonstration of the potential for representation in the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre as well as an example of the more subtle ways in which hetero- and cisnormativity can impact the depiction of a non-binary character.

Through my research, I have concluded that non-binary gender is rarely and unrealistically represented in the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre, and Robin Hobb's 'Beloved' character is both a noteworthy exception and part of the general slow movement of the genre towards greater inclusiveness.

Process of Research

I began my work with an investigation into the presence of non-binary gender in fantasy literature. Firstly, I clarified which fantasy texts I would include and which I would not – any genre of literature has texts that blur its supposed parameters, and it is impossible to be entirely absolute in drawing these lines. Given that Robin Hobb’s ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ was to be my case study, it was appropriate to use this central focus to determine the limitations of the field – in this case, to focus primarily if not solely on fantasy texts with a pseudo-medieval setting (which ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ has). The decision to define the type of fantasy by its time period (or approximation thereof) was also partly based on what is perhaps one of the most famous fantasy novels and considered to be a founding text, J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* – and on the current arguments against queer representation in pseudo-medieval set fantasy which often centre around the time period that the fantasy work is said to be confined to (such as arguing that queer characters are not historically accurate). I defined *pseudo-medieval* fantasy loosely as being stories which contained magic of some kind and involved a world which had not developed the use of electricity or more modern technology; an approximate category, certainly, but one relatively easy to identify. I also eliminated portal fantasy from consideration – stories in which the main character moves between (a facsimile of) the real world and another world (the most famous examples perhaps being C. S. Lewis’ ‘The Chronicles of Narnia’ and J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*). This exclusion was designed to avoid depictions of the “real world” and its existing gender norms, and allow for a focus on cultures that are supposedly distinct.

Once the limits of the genre were defined, fantasy reading presented a number of difficulties given the scope of my research. Firstly, the length of individual works is often between five hundred and nine hundred (and upwards) pages; secondly, most texts (certainly most of the

more well-known and influential texts) are part of series consisting of anywhere between three and forty-one books; and thirdly, it is a well-populated genre with a high number of texts to analyse and frequent new releases.

After careful consideration I made the decision to focus on so-called “starter novels” in most cases – that is, to read the first book in each series – and to then use other resources such as plot summaries and LGBT+ fiction lists in order to determine if I should read further into a particular series. This was very successful for the more notable texts in the genre, such as work by Trudi Canavan, Terry Brooks, Terry Goodkind, Robert Jordan, Scott Lynch, George R. R. Martin, Patrick Rothfuss, and Brandon Sanderson. It was also moderately successful for other texts in the genre, though the amount of available information about each text was largely dependent on its popularity. This technique did of course have its limitations, one being the aforementioned impact of popularity, and the other being that, given that non-binary gender is often deeply buried in a story, not all examples will be clearly listed in plot summaries or character lists. While I was able to compensate for this to a degree by using informal resources such as TV Tropes (a user-input online resource which lists elements found in all genres of fiction and gives extensive examples), this does make it likely that I have missed some smaller examples. However, it is reasonable to extrapolate that if I was able to miss these examples, then it is likely they conform to at least my conclusions on the hidden and dismissed nature of most non-binary representation.

Given the current interest in representation in fiction, while no list is absolute, LGBT+ fiction lists were also very useful in locating less commonly-known works as well as works that were not the first book in a series that contained queer or non-binary representation.

However, these lists typically prioritise a specific type of representation, and do not typically

list more minor or negative depictions of non-binary gender – for example, the non-binary deities in Hobb’s ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ and Martin’s ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’, or Brett’s demons and Britain’s Mornhavon the Black. This causes the same limitation as discussed above in that it was not reasonably possible to catch every existing example, but I do not believe that this was significant enough to undermine the validity of my conclusions.

The texts that I read were selected with the aim of covering a broad range of authors and publication dates while simultaneously accounting for some of the most well-known names in the genre; the latter were determined by referring to multiple bestseller/most popular lists and looking for the authors and works that reoccurred most frequently. This is obviously less applicable in the case of new authors (those published from 2017 onwards). The selection was also influenced by my base in the United Kingdom and my access to texts (some work being out of print, some published overseas). However, I am confident that the range of texts is a very reasonable one from which to draw conclusions. For a full list of all the texts I investigated, please see appendix A.

There are of course challenges inherent in analysing a sixteen-book series, and they are similar to those of analysing the fantasy genre as a whole – the substantial lengths of each book, and the number of books in the series. This gives a great deal of material with which to work, and a considerable amount of thought must go in to how to appropriately narrow the field. I handled this issue by keeping my analysis not just to Beloved alone, but specifically to Beloved’s gender where possible – though naturally it interacts with other elements of their character in multiple ways. I also used the broader analysis of multiple fantasy texts in order to set ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ in its proper context.

Inclusion of Theoretical and Cultural Context

The changes in the way in which the non-binary community is viewed (one of them, of course, being that it is visible at all) in contemporary culture are extremely significant, and their interaction with literature is not something that has previously been analysed in much breadth or depth. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, I used several theoretical frameworks in order to develop this research – feminist theory, fantasy criticism, queer theory, and transgender studies. As non-binary-specific theory is still very much in its infancy, bringing in feminist, queer, and transgender theoretical work allowed me to analyse the presentation of non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature in conversation with the existing theory (particularly including the work of Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam). I also found narrative theory to be helpful for some elements of the thesis, particularly in discussion of the diegetic/extradiegetic perspectives in ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ (using Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s work as a basis).

Significance of Research

When I began my research in late 2014, there was very little academic work available on non-binary gender or on Robin Hobb’s ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ books. Randy Schroeder’s introduction to the 2008 collection *The Influence of Imagination: essays on science fiction and fantasy as agents of social change* discusses ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ briefly, and even dedicates one line to Beloved: ‘The Fool/Amber takes queer even further, performing a complete fluidity of gender that baffles other characters – and perhaps readers – through all nine books’.⁴⁸² But not much more was available, and I could find no focus on Beloved as a non-binary character.

⁴⁸² Randy Schroeder, ‘Introduction: Polarities at the Singularity’, in *The Influence of Imagination*, ed. by Lee Easton and Randy Schroeder (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2008), pp. 5-26 (p. 16).

Over the course of my research period, I have seen significant developments in the understanding of non-binary gender on many fronts, and particularly in theory and academia. As discussed above, there have been a number of legal changes and shifts in the public understanding of non-binary gender, as well as the first non-binary focused conference and a number of publications including the interdisciplinary non-binary reader *Non-Binary and Genderqueer Genders* (2017). Fantasy fiction, more generally, has been gaining attention, specifically in connection with the growing interest in George R. R. Martin's 'A Song of Ice and Fire' and its television adaptation (which ran 2011-2019).

There have also been a number of pieces of academic work that specifically address Robin Hobb's 'Realm of the Elderlings' – Peter Melville's 'Queerness and Homophobia in Robin Hobb's Farseer Trilogies' (2018) and Sylwia Borowska-Szerzun's 'Representation of Rape in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and Robin Hobb's *Liveship Traders*' (2019) being two notable examples. 'Realm of the Elderlings' was of course still being released during my research process, with the sixteenth and final book *Assassin's Fate* being published in summer 2017, and therefore much of the existing academic work surrounds the first nine books (with the four 'Rain Wild Chronicles' often ignored as secondary to the main plot).

This research into non-binary gender in pseudo-medieval fantasy literature with a focus on Robin Hobb's 'Realm of the Elderlings' is quite clearly on the forefront of this developing body of work. There has yet to be, to my knowledge, an analysis of non-binary gender (in its current context and definition) presentation and representation in fiction to this extent, and certainly not in the fantasy genre, which is often presumed to be lacking in cultural relevance.

Similarly, there is little existing work on ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ and none of this length and depth that I am aware of.

Solely by its individuality, my research is covering a relatively un-covered subject; however, there remains the question of significance. The significance of this research is tied, fundamentally, to the issues of representation in fiction.

Representation – a word now commonly used in the book community to refer to the inclusion of characters who in one way or another do not fit into the white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, and neurotypical category that is often treated as the “default” in fiction, or who in other ways belong to a minority or discriminated-against group – is a highly relevant topic. Rudine Sims Bishop’s 1990 article ‘Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors’ addressed the lack of representation with a particular focus on its effect on children, stating that ‘[w]hen children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part’.⁴⁸³ In 2014, in response to a children’s literature panel being filled entirely by white male authors, a Twitter conversation between authors Ellen Oh and Malinda Lo led to the creation of the #weneeddiversebooks hashtag on Twitter, which developed into the founding of the non-profit organisation We Need Diverse Books.⁴⁸⁴ Lo was also the cofounder of Diversity in YA, a blog focusing on representation in young adult fiction, with fellow author Cindy Pon in 2011. We Need Diverse Books focuses

⁴⁸³ Rudine Sims Bishop, ‘Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors’, *Perspectives*, 6.3 (1990), ix-xi (p. ix).

⁴⁸⁴ We Need Diverse Books, *About WNDB* (n. d.), <<https://diversebooks.org/about-wndb/>> [accessed 15 April 2022].

on children's and young adult literature, with their mission statement being '[p]utting more books featuring diverse characters into the hands of all children'.⁴⁸⁵

However, discussions of representation are not limited to children's and young adult literature. Many representation resources – usually lists or databases dedicated to specific types of representation – include or even focus on adult fiction. And there is a great deal of discussion around the impact of diversifying your reading. Jennifer O'Brien, writing in *Psychology Today*, expresses a view that is growing in popularity: '[w]hen people are able to see something represented, they are better able to understand and grasp who those people are, and this creates an important shift in the social consciousness to include people from a range of different backgrounds'.⁴⁸⁶ This focus on representation and its importance mean that there is a strong significance to academic work which is able to analyse acts of representation in literature – to return to Bishop's statement, representation is not just about the presence of diverse characters but also about how they are present: are 'the images they see [...] distorted, negative, or laughable'?⁴⁸⁷ In what way? How is this effect created? These are questions that this thesis addresses in its analysis of 'Realm of the Elderlings' and other pseudo-medieval fantasy texts.

The 1990-2017 time period covered in this thesis shows a shift from non-binary as a theoretical concept to non-binary as an aspect of personhood, and towards the latter end to non-binary characters beginning to be centred in the narrative. Most of the pre-2017 non-binary characters do not clearly separate gender identity from anatomy, many use the

⁴⁸⁵ We Need Diverse Books, *About WNDB* (n. d.), <<https://diversebooks.org/about-wndb/>> [accessed 15 April 2022].

⁴⁸⁶ Jennifer O'Brien, 'Why Visibility Matters', *Psychology Today*, 14 November 2017. <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/all-things-lgbtq/201711/why-visibility-matters>> [accessed 15 April 2022].

⁴⁸⁷ Bishop, p. ix.

pronoun *it*, few characters are human. It is rare for these characters to have their non-binary gender presented as a complex, legitimate, and unremarkable part of their identity, instead being heavily intertwined with theories of Otherness, often framed in a negative light and sometimes placed direct opposition to acceptable, preferred cisnormativity. The shift towards more sophisticated depictions is not an entirely linear progression in which theoretical concepts or monstrous depictions disappear; instead it is a slow increase of variety, with a particularly significant surge of additions from 2017 onwards. This shift indicates that a continued increase in the number of non-binary characters could generate a significant enough amount of variety so as to trivialise them.

In much the same way as most of the pre-2017 non-binary characters, *Beloved*, is neither entirely human, nor part of a queer community. However, their non-binary gender is framed as separate from their partially non-human nature, anatomy is not used to define them, and they use presentation and name choices to influence how they are perceived by the other (cisgender) characters. Their depiction interacts with concepts of the trickster figure, is strongly influence by the cisgender perspective that they are seen through, and reflects the changing attitudes to non-binary gender in the 1995-2017 period that 'Realm of the Elderlings' was published. The depiction of *Beloved's* non-binary gender is quite different from many of the pre-2017 examples as well as from those published in 2017 and onwards, functioning as a transitional stage which exposes both the potential for sophisticated depictions of non-binary gender and the difficulties of extracting those depictions from cisnormativity and related narrative traditions.

Conclusions and Future Directions

As with any research project, the work I have done is only one part of a much larger field of study. There are many possibilities raised by the current focus on diversity in fiction and the new ways in which this focus is being expressed, including much that academia is only just beginning to investigate. My research only covers pseudo-medieval fantasy literature, but there is so much more to the fantasy genre: what is the non-binary presence in, for example, gaslight fantasy, or urban fantasy? And of course everything beyond fantasy: science fiction, crime, literary fiction, romance, et cetera, and how all of those different types of fiction interact and influence one another. I have confined my research to adult and young adult fiction, but not explored the possible distinctions between them; and there are queer characters emerging more and more in children's fiction, too.

The time frame is another obvious area for potential expansion. I limited the time frame of my analysis to 1990-2017, specifically to examine a transitional period for non-binary depiction. While research has certainly been done on queerness in fiction prior to this time period, work on fiction released from 2017 onwards is only just beginning to be published. And in terms of non-binary representation, 2017 is a tremendous turning point. We have the work of Linsey Miller and Julia Ember, both discussed or referenced in this thesis, but since then even more examples have emerged. These include Neon Yang's 'Tensorate' series (2017-29), A. R. Capetta's *The Brilliant Death* (2018), Peter V. Brett's *The Desert Prince* (2021), and Maggie Tokuda-Hall's *The Mermaid, the Witch and the Sea* (2020). It would be very valuable to investigate why 2017 is the point of change for non-binary representation, and how that interacts with the broader shift in queerness and diversity in fantasy fiction –

something *Independent* described in a 2020 article as ‘The bold new wave of fantasy writers’.⁴⁸⁸

I have taken some time in this thesis to briefly discuss the issues around non-human non-binary characters; this would also be fertile ground in science fiction research. Examples that I investigated before I narrowed my research field included the Aeluons of Becky Chambers’ *A Closed and Common Orbit* (2016) and the Gethenians of Ursula K Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and more examples have definitely emerged since then.

Also largely unspoken in this thesis is the wave of fantasy adaptation to television and film. The adaptation of George R. R. Martin’s ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’ to the award-winning *Game of Thrones* television show is perhaps the most famous example, and its success has prompted a number of other major series adaptations including Terry Brooks’ ‘Shannara’ series, Leigh Bardugo’s ‘Shadow and Bone’ trilogy, and Robert Jordan’s ‘Wheel of Time’ series. Some of these adaptations include queer characters from the original source material, and the ‘Wheel of Time’ adaptation has been noted for allowing more focus on the queerness of certain characters than shown in the source material. Analysis of the depiction of queer characters in these contexts would add another dimension to our understanding of queerness in the fantasy genre, as well as providing a demonstration of how the culture around queer representation might change between the original publication and its adaptation.

The impact in and of fan communities on queer representation is another area of interest. Fan studies has been interested in the impact of social media on the relationship between fan,

⁴⁸⁸ Ed Power, ‘The bold new wave of fantasy writers’, *Independent*, 30 November 2020. <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/fantasy-books-authors-lord-of-the-rings-game-of-thrones-tasha-suri-b1762436.html>> [accessed 15 April 2022].

creator, and text, and issues of representation can be very significant in this area. Many fandoms, including those of well-known fantasy fictions, have a strong queer focus. Judith May Fathallah, in *Fanfiction and the Author* (2017), notes that home internet ‘has prompted an unprecedented increase in the volume and visibility of slash’ (slash being queer relationships depicted in fanworks, usually fanfiction), and the timing of this increase does at least partially correspond with the increase in queer fantasy texts.⁴⁸⁹ It is important to note that Fathallah refers to an increase not just in volume but in visibility – largely due to the increased ubiquity of the internet – which could be part of the growing awareness on the part of those involved in traditionally published literature of an audience or market for queer fiction.

And of course, while my focus is on non-binary gender: what about binary transgender characters in all of these areas? How is their depiction different from the depiction of non-binary characters? What about more intersectional approaches to non-binary representation that incorporate different cultural understandings of gender, as well as the impact of race, disability, neurodiversity, or class? As the number of non-binary characters depicted in fiction grows, this field of research has the potential to grow with it, tracking the emergence of representation politics and reflections of cultural change through activism.

Robin Hobb’s ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ series mark a notable change in the pseudo-medieval fantasy genre – one which could be seen as the stepping stone from a genre without significant or sophisticated representations of non-binary gender towards a more inclusive model. And this change does not appear to be over. Texts from 2017 onwards such as Julia Ember’s *The Tiger’s Watch* and Linsey Miller’s ‘Mask of Shadows’ duology centre the non-binary narrative, allowing for greater clarity and sophistication in the depiction of the

⁴⁸⁹ Judith May Fathallah, *Fanfiction and the Author* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), p. 30.

character as well as the character's gender. While these characters often exist in fictional worlds which are cisnormative, requiring them to actively resist the culture of their own fictional environment, this allows the narrative opportunities to clarify non-binary gender in ways that are perhaps more comprehensible to the cisnormative culture in which these texts are being read. It is clear that these significant changes to the genre's depiction of non-binary gender reflect cultural shifts – legal changes, developments in medicine and psychology, and visibility of the non-binary community – and that this situation is likely to continue to develop as time passes.

In summation, while this thesis focuses on an important element of the shift in queer representation, it also can only be one step of many more to come. I look forward to seeing the development of the academic field as it moves forward.

Appendix A

Below is a list of all fictional works investigated (either in part or in entirety) over the course of this research. The majority are pseudo-medieval fantasy, but there is also a selection of works from the broader fantasy genre which I read in order to have a better grasp on how to classify the limits of “pseudo-medieval” in my thesis.

Abercrombie, Joe – *The Blade Itself* (2006)

Addison, Katherine – *The Goblin Emperor* (2014), *The Witness for the Dead* (2021)

Adeyemi, Tomi – *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* (2019)

Bardugo, Leigh – ‘Six of Crows’ (2015-2016)

Barker, R. J. – *The Bone Ships* (2019)

Blade, Adam – *First Hero* (2010)

Blake, Elly – *Frostblood* (2017)

Bouchet, Amanda – *A Promise of Fire* (2016)

Brett, Peter V. – *The Painted Man* (2008), *The Desert Prince* (2021)

Britain, Kristen – ‘Green Rider’ (1998-present)

Brooks, Terry – *The Sword of Shannara* (1977)

Canavan, Trudi – ‘Black Magician Trilogy’ (2001-2009)

Caruso, Melissa – *The Tethered Mage* (2017)

Cook, Glen – *The Black Company* (1984), *Shadows Linger* (1984), *The White Rose* (1985)

Coulthurst, Audrey – *Of Fire and Stars* (2016)

Croggon, Alison – *The Gift* (2001)

DalGLISH, David – *A Dance of Cloaks* (2010)

Dixon, Steve – *Out of the Shadows* (2003)

Donaldson, Stephen – *Lord Foul's Bane* (1977), *The Seventh Decimate* (2017)

Driver, Sarah – 'Huntress Trilogy' (2017-2018)

Durham, Paul – *The Luck Uglies* (2012)

Edwards, Graham – *Dragoncharm* (1995)

Ember, Julia – *The Tiger's Watch* (2017)

Erikson, Steven – *Gardens of the Moon* (1999)

Faizal, Hafsa – *We Hunt the Flame* (2019)

Feist, Raymond E. – *Magician* (1982)

Furey, Maggie – *The Heart of Myrial* (1998)

Gee, Emily – 'Cursed Kingdoms Trilogy' (2011-2015)

Gemmell, David – *Waylander* (1986)

Goodkind, Terry – *Wizard's First Rule* (1994)

Gratton, Tessa – *The Queens of Innis Lear* (2018)

Gwynne, John – *Malice* (2012)

Hartman, Rachel – *Seraphina* (2010)

Hobb, Robin – 'Realm of the Elderlings' (1995-2017)

Hoffman, Paul – *The Left Hand of God* (2010)

James, Marlon – *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019)

Jordan, Robert – *The Eye of the World* (1990)

Kushner, Ellen – *Swordspoint* (1987)

Larkwood, A. K. – *The Unspoken Name* (2020)

Lawrence, Mark – *Prince of Thorns* (2011)

Le Guin, Ursula K. – ‘Earthsea Quartet’ (1968-1990), *Gifts* (2004)

Leckie, Ann – *The Raven Tower* (2019)

Lo, Malinda – *Ash* (2009)

Lowe, Helen – *The Heir of Night* (2010)

Lueddecke, Lisa – *A Shiver of Snow and Sky* (2017)

Lupo, Kesia – *We Are Blood And Thunder* (2019)

Lynch, Scott – ‘Gentleman Bastard’ (2006-present)

Mansy, Lauren – *The Memory Thief* (2019)

Martin, George R. R. – ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’ (1996-present)

Miller, Linsey – ‘Mask of Shadows’ (2017-2018)

Mirrlees, Hope – *Lud-in-the-Mist* (1926)

Motayne, Maya – *Nocturna* (2019)

Ngan, Natasha – *Girls of Paper and Fire* (2018)

Nicholson, William – ‘Wind on Fire’ (2000-2002)

Nix, Garth – ‘Old Kingdom’ (1996-2021), *Angel Mage* (2019)

Novik, Naomi – *Uprooted* (2015), *Spinning Silver* (2018)

Oswald, J. D. – *Dreamwalker* (2013)

Paolini, Christopher – ‘Inheritance Cycle’ (2001-2011)

Parker, Natalie C. – *Seafire* (2018)

Pierce, Tamora – *Alanna* (1983), *Tempests and Slaughter* (2018)

Pratchett, Terry – ‘Discworld’ (1983-2015)

Rothfuss, Patrick – *The Name of the Wind* (2007)

Salisbury, Melinda – ‘Sin Eater’s Daughter’ (2015-2017)

Sanderson, Brandon – *The Final Empire* (2006)

Sebastian, Laura – ‘*Ash Princess* (2018), *Lady Smoke* (2019)

Shannon, Samantha – *Priory of the Orange Tree* (2019)

Snyder, Maria V. – ‘Chronicles of Ixia’ (2005-2010)

Tahir, Sabaa – *An Ember in the Ashes* (2015), *A Torch Against the Night* (2016)

Taylor, Laini – ‘Strange the Dreamer’ (2016-2018)

Tolcser, Sarah – *Song of the Current* (2017)

Tolkien, J. R. R. – *The Hobbit* (1937), *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955)

Turner, Marc – *When the Heavens Fall* (2015)

Walton, Jo – *Tooth and Claw* (2003)

Weeks, Brent – *The Way of Shadows* (2008), *The Black Prism* (2010)

White, Kiersten – *And I Darken* (2016)

Williams, Jen – ‘Winnowing Flame Trilogy’ (2017-2019)

Williams, Tad – *The Witchwood Crown* (2017)

Wooding, Chris – *The Ember Blade* (2019)

Wragg, David – *The Black Hawks* (2019)

Yu, Mimi – *The Girl King* (2019)

Appendix B

Robin Hobb is a penname of Margaret Ogden, who also uses the penname Megan Lindholm. Under the name Robin Hobb, she has written two fantasy series: ‘The Soldier Son Trilogy’ (*Shaman’s Crossing*, 2005; *Forest Mage*, 2006; *Renegade’s Magic*, 2008) and the ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ series. The ‘Realm of the Elderlings’ series is the focus of both chapter three and chapter four of this thesis. It consists of sixteen books split into four trilogies and a quartet, as follows:

‘The Farseer Trilogy’

Assassin’s Apprentice (1995)

Royal Assassin (1996)

Assassin’s Quest (1997)

‘The Liveship Traders Trilogy’

Ship of Magic (1998)

The Mad Ship (1999)

Ship of Destiny (2000)

‘The Tawny Man Trilogy’

Fool’s Errand (2001)

The Golden Fool (2002)

Fool’s Fate (2003)

‘The Rain Wild Chronicles’

The Dragon Keeper (2009)

Dragon Haven (2010)

City of Dragons (2011)

Blood of Dragons (2011)

‘The Fitz and the Fool Trilogy’

Fool’s Assassin (2014)

Fool’s Quest (2015)

Assassin’s Fate (2017)

Robin Hobb has also written a short prequel to the series called *The Wilful Princess and the Piebald Prince* (2013) and five short stories set in the same fictional universe but unconnected to the central plot (‘The Inheritance’, 2000; ‘Homecoming’, 2003; ‘Words Like Coins’, 2009; ‘Blue Boots’, 2010; ‘Cat’s Meat’, 2011).

The series is set in the titular fictional realm, an unspecified but considerable time after the collapse of the symbiotic human/dragon civilisation (Elderlings) due to a natural disaster. The land is now divided into a number of different countries, many of which have in some way made use of the remnants of Elderling society: the Outislands (also known as the God Runes), the Six Duchies, and the Mountain Kingdom in the north; Chalced; the Rain Wilds, Bingtown, the Pirate Isles, and Jamaillia in the south; and Mersenia across the southern ocean (where Beloved comes from). Beloved has fled their home to complete their task as prophet: to alter the course of events so that the end of the world is averted and dragons (and therefore Elderlings) will return.

This overarching plot is revealed gradually over the course of the first nine books. The first and third trilogies ('The Farseer Trilogy' and 'The Tawny Man Trilogy') are narrated in the first person by FitzChivalry Farseer (Fitz), the illegitimate son of the heir to the Six Duchies throne, and follow his life as the Six Duchies is engulfed in war and he must negotiate the dangerous politics of court whilst protecting those he loves. The second trilogy ('The Liveship Traders Trilogy') falls chronologically between the first and third and takes place predominantly in the south as Bingtown, the Rain Wilds and the Pirate Isles claim independence from Jamaillian rule. This trilogy is written in the third person from the perspective of nineteen different characters.

Present in all of the first three trilogies is Beloved, appearing in 'The Farseer Trilogy' as the Fool (a somewhat androgynous person working as a court jester and gradually befriending Fitz), in 'The Liveship Traders Trilogy' as Amber (a female woodcarver working in Bingtown), and in 'The Tawny Man Trilogy' as Lord Golden (a visiting noble to the Six Duchies court, known to only a few as the former Fool). It is not until 'The Tawny Man Trilogy' that Beloved's original name is revealed to Fitz, and at this point their significant involvement in the plot also grows – having spent the first eight books influencing events and growing closer to Fitz, in the ninth book they must die at the hands of an enemy prophet in order to succeed in altering events as they wish to.

Following the first three trilogies is 'The Rain Wild Chronicles', a quartet which charts the discovery of the Elderling city Kelsingra. It features several characters who first appeared in 'The Liveship Traders Trilogy' and is told from multiple third person perspectives. Beloved

is not present in these books, having returned to their homeland at the end of 'The Tawny Man Trilogy', but there are several references to former White Prophets.

Finally, 'The Fitz and the Fool Trilogy' returns to the Six Duchies and Fitz's first person perspective, which in the middle of the first book begins to alternate with the first-person perspective of his daughter Bee. Beloved arrives in the Six Duchies in the climax of the first book, and when Bee is kidnapped Beloved convinces Fitz to seek revenge. The final book ends in the transmutation of Fitz and Beloved into a magical stone statue.

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