

Introduction

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

episodes and series, films, video games, novels and short stories, comics, manga and graphic novels, and board games.

In many ways each of the terms that make up the title of this collection – gender, sexuality, contemporary, popular and fantasy – is contested. Following the interventions of third wave feminism and queer theory, gender and sexuality/ies have come unstuck from their traditional series of binaries and must now be understood as, at the very least, subject to change over time and at most, fundamentally ‘troubled’ (Butler, 1990). There are also many, often conflicting, approaches to exploring and considering gender and sexuality/ies and this is clearly reflected in the diverse essays included in this collection. The multitude of perspectives, views and voices within contemporary discourses of gender and sexuality is a reflection of the long-needed opening up of the space of discussion to voices and perspectives that have previously been excluded. Words have power and naming, in particular, has often come with an agenda to oppress or marginalise. In recognition of this, we have not compelled our contributors to adopt any one particular term or set of terms in their essays. Instead we have given them the space to use the terms they consider most suitable for the texts with which they engage. In doing so we hope that the collection echoes some of the extraordinary diversity of the field.

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

of our contributors quite rightly seek to situate the texts they discuss within broader histories of representation and genre.

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

The majority of essays here focus on immersive secondary world fantasy. By making a fantasy immersive the audience is given the illusion of the suspense of the social rules of the society in which they live. An immersive secondary world is one in which literally *anything* could happen. In creating a fantasy world anything is possible, therefore writers, artists, directors, creators and producers of fantasy worlds

must acknowledge a degree of responsibility for their world beyond that of other creators. Therefore, it is appropriate for the various authors in this collection to interrogate the ways in which these worlds are created. Beyond individual texts the meta-discourse of the genre may also be understood as encouraging a recognition of contingency. While we would be very cautious about making any definitive claim about the potential of fantasy to offer a space for critical reflection on social norms of gender and sexuality, the texts explored in this collection demonstrate that it is possible to produce popular fantasy texts which do achieve this.

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

Lenise Prater begins a series of literary evaluations by examining the different depictions of queerness in Robin Hobb's fantasy. The next two chapters develop a

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

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

Andrew Butler and Anna Madill also deal with similar themes – gay representation and fantasy / phantasy within Young Adult (YA) fiction and manga.

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

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

Alan Moore’s authorship of *Swamp Thing* (1983-87) formed a groundbreaking run on a comic series that had hitherto lived in the shadow of the censorial Comics Code Authority. The character of Swamp Thing / Alex Olsen allowed Moore to question issues that now seem commonplace in comics; the transition from human – hero – proto-monster, and the debates that surround this; humanity, love, environmentalism and sex. *Swamp Thing* was a commercial success for DC Comics, and paved the way for many subsequent writings within comic book history. The work is also typical of Moore’s own work, which typically explores

self-representation and sexuality through a number of means, including his later work *Lost Girls* (2006 / 7), which re-encodes the sexual awakening of Lewis Carroll's Alice, L. Frank Baum's Dorothy, and J.M.Barrie's Wendy.

Two papers deal with the growing area of gendered representation in Game Studies. This is a topic that preoccupies both scholars and gamers themselves, and as a result, the subject of the first paper; the video games produced by BioWare, has become a perennial topic in Game Studies scholarship. Here, the various franchises are examined in terms of the ways that they represented LGBT characters, and the responses to these by fans and game players. As one of the games companies at the forefront of creating more diverse characters, BioWare has been subject both to censure and commendation. Steven Holmes examines this in the light of counterpublic responses to the games, as well as the changes initiated over time by BioWare themselves.

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

Katherine Farrimond 's examination of virginity within fantasy texts, most notably long haul television series' *Supernatural* and *True Blood*, questions the tropological representation and understanding of virginity. Her discussion of how the broken hymen functions as a symbol of virginity lost is counteracted by the more prosaic reality, where this rarely occurs during first sexual contact. The loss of virginity is predominantly feminised because of this linkage, and there is also an uncomfortable association the assumption that penetrative vaginal sex should be considered as a characters' first sexual experience. Farrimond examines masculine and feminine depictions of virginity within this assumptive framework, and examines the implications of discourse within each whereby characters such as Jessica Hanby from *True Blood* and Dean from *Supernatural* become 'rehymenated' (4.5 2008).

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

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

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

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