"I SET NO LIMITS ON MY LOVE" -- MAGIC, QUEERNESS AND THE DISRUPTION
OF BINARIES IN ROBIN HOBB'S *REALM OF THE ELDERLINGS*

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ABSTRACT

From the world of BBC's Merlin to the comic book pages of the X-Men, supernatural abilities have been used as a repeated allegory for discrimination and the importance of community. These examples, paraliterary as they are, provide a means of engagement for contemporary audiences to bond, relate and identify with these characters, long before they understand what is being suggested. In this sense, they can blend into our pop cultural consciousness, seeding questions about our assumptions regarding different races, sexualities, genders and abilities.

Robin Hobb's *Realm of the Eldering's* series, which began with the bestselling *Farseer Trilogy*, explores this capability with a level of nuance that demands investigation and analysis to uncover all of its potential; from its explorations and deconstructions of the binaries, to its questioning of what it means to be in love with someone. In this, we will be building upon the work of Peter Melville and Lenise Prater, expanding beyond their original readings. Chapter One begins by analysing the binary magical system in place and the ways in which Fitz disturbs this system and the assumptions which are built into it with his unique ability to wield both magics -- paying particular attention to the ways this unsettles Burrich as he tries to enforce his own hatred of their shared gift of Wit onto his ward. During this, we shall draw upon Julia Kristeva's work with Abjection as a potential source of understanding for Burrich's fear of Wit as well as considering the pride displayed by Burrich in his masculinity and the ways in which his fear can be viewed as an attempt to protected that masculinity, influenced by Judith Butler's work, *Gender Trouble.* Chapter Two proceeds to explore the ways in which the Kingdom of the Six Duchies parallels our reality's patriarchal leanings, before analysing the ways in which The Fool serves to disturb this with zeir unique presentation of gender, rooted in zeir magical ability as a White, and how this, in turn, serves to unsettle Fitz as a direct effect of Burrich's teachings. Finally, Chapter Three will consider the relationship between Fitz and The Fool, the ways in which they are bonded by their love and care for one another, and the different forms this bond may take -- this shall be explored through both a magical lens befitting the world in which the character belong to, as well as drawing upon theories around radical care as proposed by Hiʻilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese, and Edmund Husserl's work on inter-subjectivity.

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INTRODUCTION

To begin, let me first outline the goals of this project, to give you an understanding of our journey ahead. I aim to consider Patricia Waugh's argument that fantasy's transgressive relationship to reality has the ability to "decentralise and subvert concepts of gender and identity"[1] and use this belief as a starting point to explore magic as an allegorical substitute for the queer experiences. In doing this, I hope to demonstrate Waugh's point as well as reframe the idea of what fantasy is capable of, away from its conservative roots and problems. This is not to say these will be ignored, as much of the allegory comes through from the hatred expressed against forms of magic, but instead to begin a journey of adjusting the perspective of fantasy's potential. As such, this essay will be engaging with queerness through the primary texts first, and using the application of theory in order to support and bolster what is present within the material -- the primary texts will be front and centre, following the lines found within the texts, rather than trying to fit the text to queer theory. This particular methodological choice is important to note as I am aware at times this may seem an atypical approach to the chapters structure --- for example, most chapters will begin with outlining the ways in which Hobb's series replicates or upholds certain binaries, before delving into the disruptions presented by characters. Though I could have dedicated less time to exploring this replication, I believe it is important to acknowledge this and establish exactly what the characters are disrupting, in the same way it is important to acknowledge both the flaws and potential of the fantasy genre.

With this in mind, the chapters will proceed as follows. Chapter One will explore the idea of substitute alterity in regards to Hobb's magical system, looking at how the binary of Wit and Skill directly mimics and parallels hetero and homosexual experiences. This will

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[1] Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (London, Routledge: 1989)

build upon the work done by Peter Melville regarding the existence of a "Wit-Closet". It will also pay particular attention to the language used by characters to discuss Wit and how it directly references homophobic rhetoric with its dependence on ideas of not being "masculine enough" and of a corruption temptation, with direct references to notable homophobic speeches and schools of thought. Burrich's speeches will play a vital role in this as he is a Wit-wielder teaching Fitz to hate and feel shame about their shared gift in a manner distinctly reminiscent of internalised homophobia and the spreading of such self-hatred. The chapter will end by considering how Fitz disrupts this as a character capable of wielding both forms of magic and what this means for the binary magical system of the world.

Chapter Two will then engage in an exploration of the presented gender binary of the Six Duchies, and the ways in which the figure of The Fool disturbs this, much like Fitz disturbs the sexuality binary represented by Wit/Skill. The Fool[2] actively resists attempts to gender zem, both consciously and in terms of character function. Zey are a shapeshifter, a trickster, and a magical being, all of which will be considered and analysed for their queer potentials and how they come together to create The Fool -- a disruptive force within the landscape of the *Realm of the Elderings*, and a figure whose continual support and presence in Fitz's life forces him to reevaluate Burrich's lessons of shame.

It is this continued support which will then take centre place in Chapter Three, as we delve into the powerful bond between the two characters. We will explore this from three different understandings -- through the magically befitting lens of soulmates, as well as the

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[2] Throughout this work, The Fool will be referred to with the pronouns Ze/Zem/Zeir as opposed to the text's use of He/Him/His or She/Her/Hers for two reasons. Firstly, this will help with clarity as The Fool is a shapeshifter who transitions between gendered presentations. Secondly, this is done to avoid gendering The Fool as zey are a character who actively tries to avoid this and, as this is something I shall be exploring, it would be counterproductive to not try and respect this in whatever manner I can. Quotations will however, be left with the pronouns used within the text, as many discussions will deal with how zey are perceived in terms of zeir gender presentation.

more grounded understandings of radical care and intersubjectivity. From there, we will consider what it means for a queer couple to exist in a magical sphere, addressing complications that come about from understanding a queer couple as soulmates, as well as the canonical homophobia of the Six Duchies. This canonical homophobia will then bring us to our final point, that perhaps Fitz can never truly understand his bond with The Fool, because he does not have the right framework to do so. He only knows queerness as inherently sexual and so, in denying any sexual desire for The Fool, he believes cannot love The Fool *like that*. However, with an understanding that asexuality exists, what does this mean when he never actually denies this love?

Before we can tackle those question, however, we must have an understanding of the scholarly sphere we are entering. For many, the starting point for any thesis begins with defining your core concepts in order to set the stage for the argument ahead. Such a practice allows for the demonstration of knowledge and understanding from the very first line and enables an immediate exploration of the surrounding scholarship one hopes to find themselves situated amidst. Yet, when it comes to individual paraliterary genres and forms (that is, those which have not typically been considered as worthy of being viewed as 'true literature' such as the genres of science fiction and fantasy as well as forms like commercial fiction, television and film), there is something of a debate around this approach. As Samuel R. Delany highlights within his book *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and The Politics of the Paraliterary,* many of the enactments of this practice within the limited amount of available scholarship on paraliterary topics have a tendency to come across as a defensive motion and as such, sometimes it is 'our very insistence that our genre *might be* susceptible to "rigorous

definition" [that] functions [...] as a ready-made admission that the genre *must be* substantially less complex and vital than any of the literary genres.'[3]

This is particularly relevant for us, as few genres pose quite such difficulty in defining as that of the Fantasy genre, especially when trying to avoid devauling or oversimplifying the genre. While it may at first seem easily identifiable, with its iconic imagery drawing upon magic, folklore and fairytales, to limit it simply to such imagery would be to ignore the depth of both the genre itself as well as its origins. Though fantasy elements have long since existed within Western art and literature, the notion of fantasy as a defined genre is arguably one which can only come into fruition as a response to the emergence of mimesis (also known as realism) as a genre. It is only in the aftermath of intentional realism that we can truly see the existence of intentional fantasy. The contrast between the two highlights these fantastical elements as not just features of literature as a whole, but their own specific space within the art form, distinct from other versions of it. And yet, the impact of prior works upon the shaping of the genre is nonetheless undeniable. Fairy tales and mythology are the backbones of the modern concept of fantasy. Even the earliest forms of written fiction from the ancient world are works that we may understand as most closely related to fantasy -- texts such as the *Odyssey,* which follows the travels of its hero through a world dominated by giants, sorcerers and monsters, and the epic poem *Beowulf,* whose three-fold story details the heroic fights against a monster, its mother and a dragon. These works and others like them (such as Virgil's *Aeneid* and Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda)* have all been noted as influences by various fantasy writers throughout the years of the genre's being. All of these tales are filled with fantasy elements, and yet seem to stand aside from the genre of fantasy itself. As such, it

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[3] Samuel R. Delany, 'Politics of Paraliterary Criticism' Queer Thoughts & the Politics of the Paraliterary (Wesleyan University Press; University Press of New England, 1999) p240

seems prudent to discuss how these seemingly similar yet distinctly separated forms of literature bleed into one another.

Myths, legends and sagas, like that which we have already considered, are the starting point which then continued into the Middle Ages in the form of Romance and Chivalric tales, most notably regarding the tales of King Arthur. Early Arthurian stories can be seen as part of the wider tradition of chivalric literature and subsequently revolve around the commonly occurring themes of this literary mode such as love and adultery; later, with the influences of the Church, the stories tie in more to Christian themes, codified under the quest of the Holy Grail. Mediaeval romances also concerned themselves with the Matter of France and stories of Charlemagne and his Paladins, though these rarely had the same impact as the Arthurian tales which were periodically revived in order to bring support towards the English monarchy, a detail which contributed to their longstanding cultural power. The cumulative history of fantasy then moves to the end of the seventeenth century, by which point Charles Perrault and Madame d'Aulnoy have popularised courtly fairytales.[4] These polished versions of folktales (which we also see further popularised in the collections of the Brothers Grimm) were both formulaic in their repetitive use of certain features (three wishes, three tasks, etc.) and also, random, in terms of their idea of the fae, which often strayed from the wild and capricious image within both the Celtic and Irish fairy traditions. Perrault and Grimm were collectors and, most importantly, revisers, who domesticated the tales in order to suit the tastes of their (respectively) aristocratic and bourgeois readers, a behaviour which then lends to the nineteenth centuries move towards creating original fairy tales for the modern reader and their manners. Though originally intended for an adult readership, these fairytales have since become increasingly seen as a genre aimed at children, with the main purpose being to

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[4] *Madame d'Aulnoy, the mysterious fairy tale queen,* Jack Zipes, (Princeton University Press Online, March 17 2021) https://press.princeton.edu/ideas/madame-daulnoy-the-mysterious-fairy-tale-queen [accessed 03/08/2024]

pass on important lessons about the world and how to behave within it to the next generation. At the end of the nineteenth century, there was a cultural move towards pulling these known forms of the fantastical into a common centre, combining them with new, distinctly more modern forms. This move came in accordance with the rise of intellectual changes within European culture - namely, the advent of the Enlightenment period, a time which saw an unprecedented rise in free-thinking, manifested in the growth of various fields, such as philosophy as well as the pure and applied sciences. Through this, the world became one which could be understood and therefore, it was argued, controlled. Ideas such as Deism (that is, the rationalist theory that asserts that empirical reason and observation are solely logical, reliable, and sufficient to determine the existence of God as the creator of the universe) as well as Immanuel Kant's continuation of the epistemological debate regarding the acquisition of knowledge combined with scientific developments to evoke a cultural and societal desire within the western world to re-evaluate how the world is perceived. Art and literature, in turn, responded. Some turned to the creation of the Gothic genre, which turned this idea of control on its head by forcing its characters, and therefore, its audience to confront the notion that this surface perception is an untrustworthy delusion hiding many sinister truths below what we as humans can bear witness to. Others within the literary scene, however, took note of and were shaped by:

> 'The widespread interest in and market for stories of real life with ordinary, believable characters [which] grew and flourished concurrently with the increasing dominance of the scientific method, the expansion of the industrial revolution, and the unfolding of related historical developments.'[5]

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[5] Richard Mathews, *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination.* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997)

It is the collision of these real-life stories, the response to the contemporary thinking and the introduction of a time period like the industrial revolution which was so marked by transformation and change which lends itself perfectly as a breeding ground from the start and development of a genre such as the modern fantasy genre. The industrial revolution is often now thought of in terms of how it looked once it was in place - the warehouses, workshops and factories with billowing smoke and hard, grimy work conditions are the iconic mental picture. Little regard is typically afforded to the transitional period when it comes to the wider public view of the period, and yet nonetheless, there is no better way to describe the industrial era than as an era of rapid change, transfiguration and transformation. Industrial development nearly eradicated an entire cultural way of life as it progressed, destroying nature and traditional, agricultural villages and towns. E.P.Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* contains the story of an aristocratic traveller who, in 1792, visited the Yorkshire Dales , only to be "alarmed to find a new cotton-mill in the "pastoral vale" of Aysgarth—"why, here now is a great flaring mill, whose back stream has drawn off half the water of the falls above the bridge""[6] Life as it had been known was being fundamentally changed. Farmland was replaced by factories and time spent in the open air of the fields was swapped for hours in the bleak, smoggy indoors of workshops. Many people's understanding of work, and as such, day-to-day was shifting, as a "new working class" developed within the factories and cotton mills slowly taking over the once pastoral country.[7] With this cultural backdrop, it is unsurprising that some authors' work also shifted as they turned their pens towards the creation of different worlds in which the traditional, agrarian way of life was not being systematically disrupted. This typically meant framing fantasy

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[6] E.P.Thompson, '*The Making of the English Working Class*', (Random House: New York, 1963)
[7] Ibid

within the past, usually, a mediaeval past in which the agricultural lifestyle overtly shaped the world, even when not the focus of the narrative -- this is not to say that early fantasy was simply idealised examples of pastoral life, but rather that the authors chose to explore the themes of strife, unfulfilled desires and loss in a world that's very nature exemplary of these notions to the audience. The pastoral visions presented to the readers were on the losing side of the landscape war, symbolic of a life and its desire that was being condemned as a relic of the past and forever lost to the people reading the tales.

The Industrial Revolution's rate of change marked a distinct turning point for all humanity. As Isaac Asimov noted:

'Until modern times, the rate of change was so slow as to make the process unnoticeable in the course of any one person's lifetime... The steadily increasing rate of change reached the stage, at about 1800, of becoming clearly visible to many thoughtful individuals. The Industrial Revolution was beginning, and those affected by it could detect change in the course of their own lifetimes. For the first time, some people grew to understand that not only was change taking place, but that it would continue to take place after their deaths.'[8]

As such, it is unsurprising that such a transformative time would result in the advent of genres such as Science Fiction and Fantasy. Authors witnessed the rapid change around them and realised 'if today was radically different from yesterday, then tomorrow would

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[8] Asimov. Isaac. *Asimov on Science Fiction.* (New York: Doubleday, 1981) pp 75-76

differ equally radically from today.'[9] From here, while science fiction grew into a game of 'what if…' and exploring 'human beings [reactions] to changes in science and fiction'[10], fantasy writers turned to the stability of the past, finding a treasure trove of potential in the tales that had been passed down from generation to generation for years already. In doing so, Fantasy writers drew on these tales that had shaped the world and, in turn, reshaped them into complex tales exploring the truths of human beings, relationships and society.

Within the last century, fantasy as a genre has truly come into its own, beginning with J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) which marked the beginning of the high fantasy subgenre. Both a creative and commercial success, the epic was a massive cultural turning point for the fantasy genre, ushering it into the mainstream and securing Tolkien's place as the undisputed centre point of inspiration for countless fantasy writers who followed him. The works of Tolkien's and other wildly successful contemporaries of his (C. S. Lewis for example) drew the fantasy genre from the literary periphery into the spotlight and yet even this was not enough to truly earn the genre the credibility its complexity truly deserves. In the subsequent years, fantasy has continued to evolve and diversify, with *The Sword of Shannara* by Terry Brooks (1977) becoming the first fantasy novel to appear on The New York Times trade paperback bestsellers list, while J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* franchise (1997-2007) has become an undeniable staple of modern pop culture and public consciousness. Even as this essay is written, we as a society are currently experiencing a massive boom around the fantasy genre, with many of the most popular TV shows that are dominating the media conversation belonging to this genre, such as HBO's Game of Thrones

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[9] Holly E Ordway, *The Development of the Modern Fantasy Novel* (Massachusetts, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2001) p54

[10] Asimov, *Asimov on Science Fiction*, p76

*f*prequel, 'House of the Dragon' and Netflix's adaptation of 'The Witcher' franchise, which draws on both the books and the games by the same name.

Ultimately, while attempts at defining fantasy as simply as 'A fantasy tale tells a story, or depicts events and adventures, involving magic, alternate worlds, or both, so that the story could not take place in the 'real world''[11] may encapsulate the most identifiable components, they nonetheless fall short. In the simplest of terms, fantasy is simply that which is fantastical. Though a tautological definition, it is the closest we can definitively come to, demonstrating both the genre's innate fluidity as well as the flaws with trying to find concrete definitions for such fluid things as genres, especially ones which are so popular and open to expansion and development. The genre may often shift shape, even disguising itself within other genres, yet nonetheless maintaining a core subject across all forms -- the human spirit. In this, we can find a distinct similarity to queerness as a concept becomes apparent. As Annamarie Jagose explored in '*Queer Theory; An Introduction*' queerness, much like Fantasy, is a fundamentally contrary thing that resists sitting neatly in a box – 'It is not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics.'[12] Ursula K. Le Guin explained fantasy as similarly fluid, stating it was like ' a journey. It is a journey into the subconscious mind, [...] it can be dangerous; *and it will change you.*'[13] At a fundamental level, Fantasy is a genre defined by its own rules - the world, the systems and the characters

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[11] Steven S. Long, *Defining Fantasy,* http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1150388/15767768/1325081308097/Defining+Fantasy.pdf?token=F7c4i9txFDSm46JwfV4MunZi3Ag%3D (2011) [accessed 7/01/2023]

[12] Annamarie Jagose, '*Queer Theory; An Introduction*' (New York University Press, New York, 1996) p1

[13] Ursula K. Le Guin, 'From Elfland to Poughkeepsie' from *The Language of the night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction* (London, Women's Press: 1989)

are separated from our existence by the very laws of both our reality and theirs. It is this nature and potential for temporary escapisms that draws the readers in. For the time the reader enters the world by beginning reading, to when they put the book back down, the reader is granted a reprieve from the constraints from our universe, and immersed in a whole new set of rules and guidelines, which they are allowed to learn without the pressure that comes with learning the rules of our world. As John H. Timmerman establishes in *Other Worlds: The Fantasy Genre,* it is this affirmation of escape with the inherent ability to return that "lies at the heart of fantasy literature; the reader longs to stand apart for a time, not to escape but to rejoin [the earth]".[14] Under this lens, fantasy is essentially a genre created for the maximisation of the rejuvenating nature of catharsis.

It is components like this catharsis, as well as the genre's undeniable connection to change, transformation and metamorphosis that make it one so well primed for queer interpretations. Catharsis is typically associated with tragedies (though as literature and genres have developed this has subsequently become more complex as most tales can no longer be defined as simply tragedies, but rather afforded more specific categorisation in order to account for their nuance as well as the growth of literature as a whole), given that the term was originally brought into literature by Aristotle in his work, *Poetics*, which focuses on defining which makes a dramatic tragedy. The word Catharsis (derived from the Greek *katharsis* meaning "purification" or "purgation") developed from the medical understanding of the evacuation of the *catamenia* (menstrual fluid or other reproductive material from a patient) and was used by Aristotle as a metaphor to compare the effects of tragedy of the mind of the audience to the effect of this evacuation on the body. For Aristotle, "Tragedy is

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[14] John H. Timmerman, *Other Worlds: The Fantasy Genre,* (Ohio, Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983)

an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotion."[15] In other words, Aristotle explains the purpose of tragedy as this catharsis that it supplies -- in enacting the typically negative emotions, the audience/reader is able to explore them through an external method, rather than being solely dependent of introspective thinking, allowing them to work through and experience the emotions in what can feel like a safer method. Even though many people may not know of this idea as a defined theory or concept, most of us have a notion of watching a sad film when we are already feeling down to feel company in our misery and to process the feelings in a more palpable manner before confronting them directly.

For marginalised people in particular, this catharsis can be particularly useful given the arguably insurmountable complexity of certain issues faced by marginalised groups due to the way those issues are embedded into society itself. When trying to process the notion that simply because of how you love others, how you express your own identity, or even just the colour of your skin, there will seemingly always be those who loudly choose and profess hatred directing their attention upon you, having a story and world to escape into and provide an emotional outlet and space to explore the tumultuous feelings that this notion brings is something difficult to overstate the importance of. When applied to fantasy specifically, this is particularly relevant to queer people given the genre's thematic association with ideas of inherent otherness, rejection and search for belonging and acceptance around that very otherness.

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[15] Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. and trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), p10

Before we delve further into this idea however, it is important to demonstrate why this matters as something to study. While there is this queer appeal to fantasy, it exists in opposition to the conservative nature and roots of the genre. The fantasy genre carries a reputation of being Eurocentric, that is, having a worldview that is centred on Western, and specifically white, viewpoints and experiences. This as a reputation makes sense for the genre, given the time in which fantasy rose to popularity within fictional genres – it is unsurprising given the social, political and economic characteristics of this era that the genre's defining and most visibly influential authors are, for the most part, white men, such as the already referenced J. R. R. Tolkien, and C. S. Lewis. While authors of colour may have been equally involved, their involvement would have been commonly relegated to pulp publishing -- Samuel R. Delany addresses this as such:

> "We know of dozens upon dozens upon dozens of early pulp writers only as names. They conducted their careers entirely by mail -- in a field and during an era where pen names were the rule rather than the exception … we simply have no way of knowing if one, or three, or seven of them -- or even many more -- were blacks, Hispanics, women, Native American, Asians or whatever."[16]

This skewing of influence results in an inherent bias towards certain perspectives: "the structural racisms and sexisms [...] which shaped Western society when the foundations of Fantasy were laid [contributed] to both the Capacity of White men" who wrote and published fantasy as well as "strongly influenced the shape of the worlds they imagined, worlds which

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[16] Samuel R. Delany, *Racism and Science Fiction*, The New York Review of Science Fiction, Issue 120 (1998) https://www.nyrsf.com/racism-and-science-fiction-.html [accessed 10/11/2023]

were decidedly Eurocentric and reproduced White race-thinking."[17] In Tolkien's own words for example, the forces of "evil", the orcs, are described as "corruptions of the "human" form [...] they are (were) squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes"[18] in contrast to the fair-skinned forces of "good." As N. K. Jemisin further clarifies, Orcs, in both Tolkien's work and beyond (having developed into a commonly occurring fantasy race), "are human beings who can be slaughtered without conscience or apology."[19] Popular fantasy role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* continues this notion, listing the race within the *Monster Manual* handbook with the other derivative demi-human beings, as "savage raiders and pillagers with stooped postures, low foreheads and piggish faces."[20] The handbook also describes Orcs as having "tribes like plagues" and being "scavengers" with brutal bloodlust. Their intelligence is characteristically considered mid to low, even having a separate sub-race known as Orog, who have a "surprisingly keen intellect" but are in turn, cast out by other Orcs and known as "Detached Killers"[21]

Fantasy as a genre within the modern era is not unknowing about its problem. In June 2020, during the *Black Lives Matter* movement, the *D&D* development team acknowledged the flaws in their storytelling in a post titled "Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons." In the post, they explained how:

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[17] Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness,* (London, Routledge: 2016) pp 15-16

[18] J R R Tolkien, *Letter to Forrest J. Ackerman, 1958'* found in *The Letters of J R R Tolkien,* ed by Humphrey Carpenter, (London, George Allen & Unwin: 1981) p293

[19] N. K. Jemisin, *'From the Mailbag: The Unbearable Baggage of Orcing'* (Feb 12, 2013) https://nkjemisin.com/2013/02/from-the-mailbag-the-unbearable-baggage-of-orcing/ [accessed 10/11/2023]

[20] *'Dungeons & Dragons: Monster Manual',* (USA, Wizards of the Coast LLC; 2018) p244

[21] *'Dungeons & Dragons: Monster Manual'* p245

"Throughout the 50-year history of D&D, some of the peoples in the game—orcs and Drow being two of the prime examples—have been characterized as monstrous and evil, using descriptions that are painfully reminiscent of how real-world ethnic groups have been and continue to be denigrated. That's just not right, and it's not something we believe in. Despite our conscious efforts to the contrary, we have allowed some of those old descriptions to reappear in the game. We recognize that to live our values, we have to do an even better job in handling these issues. If we make mistakes, our priority is to make things right."[22]

While acknowledgment like these and promises to do better are important (so long as they are followed through on), this is not an issue from just one source. Fantasy as a whole has a tradition and throughline of issues like genetic determinism, ranging from "this race does this job" to "this race is always evil." These issues are also not limited to racism -- in recent years, J.K. Rowling has come under mass scrutiny for issues of antisemitism and homophobia within her writing -- specifically in reference to the use of werewolves as a metaphor for the AIDs crisis and the appearance of Goblins as bankers. If we are to tackle the prevalence of this issues within the genre, it is not only important for us to remove these problematic motifs and images, but to reframe the potential of the fantasy genre. With this in mind, exploring the queer potential readings within fantasy literature as a whole, as well as in specific examples such as Hobb's work becomes an important endeavour.

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[22] Wizards of the Coast, '*Diversity and Dungeons & Dragons'* (June 17 2020) https://dnd.wizards.com/news/diversity-and-dnd [accessed 10/112023]

Much like the Gothic genre, one of the 'main [functions of fantasy is] to demonstrate the relationship between the marginal and the mainstream, between reciprocal states of queerness and non-queerness.'[23] The term 'queer' is one of multiple meanings and interpretations, and is necessarily so because of these various meanings and their inherent connected nature to the concept of openness. In the most broad of senses, *queer* refers to the 'questioning of dominant forms of social and political [behaviours, etiquettes and] relationships.'[24] More specifically, however, *queer* has frequently been used in references to 'those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire'[25] -- in other words, the term queer refers to genders, sexualities and behaviours which are seen to disrupt the heteronormative societal perception of 'natural' and acceptable behaviours. Under this understanding, it is easy to see why queer exploration and discussion has often been rendered taboo, even within a genre like fantasy which is seemingly so primed to explore such topics -- queer identities have often been spoken of as 'forms of resistance to the heteronormative order [...] aim[ing] to destabilise the binaries (such as masculine-feminine, heterosexual-homosexual, dominant-submissive, active-passive) that are so central to upholding [the] normative categories'[26] seen as central to western society. And yet, as many have pointed out, the scarcity of queer images, themes and characters in fantasy is nonetheless particularly disappointing due to the genre's 'foundational premise concepts of

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[23] William Hughes, and Andrew Smith. "Introduction: Queering the Gothic." *Queering the Gothic.* Ed. William Hughes and Andrew Smith. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009)

[24] Lewis C. Seifert, *Queer(ing) Fairy Tales,* Marvels & Tales, Vol 29, No 1 (2015) p16

[25] Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. (New York: New York UP, 1996)

[26] Lewis C. Seifert, *Queer(ing) Fairy Tales,* Marvels & Tales, Vol 29, No 1 (2015) p16

difference, transgression, eroticism and the alien'[27] which seemingly makes it uniquely suited to the exploration of that which questions and queers these supposedly integral tenants of society. Although being a quote originally talking about Science Fiction, Wendy Pearson's description of this trend which coexists in the genre often known as fantasy's sibling fit's the fantasy genre perfectly:

> 'On the one hand, there is the particular aptness of science fiction, as a non-mimetic form of writing, to produce stories in which sexuality does not need to be understood in ways "vouched for by human senses and common sense" and to interrogate the ways in which sexual subjectivities are created as effects of the system that sustains them. On the other hand, there are also the variety of ways in which most science fiction texts, regardless of their identification as "estranged fictions," are completely unselfconscious in their reproduction of the heteronormative environment in which they were written.'[28]

There is a tension present in the vast majority of Fantasy stories, rooted in the inherent conflict between the genre's fundamental focus upon the strange, the different, *the queer,* which gives the genre an inherent 'potentially disruptive nature'[29] and the cultural and persistent adherence to mainstream mentalities, no matter how conservative or potentially contrary to the genre's ideals they may seem to be: 'Fantasy provides a realm where same-sex

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[27] Phyllis M. Betz *The Lesbian Fantastic: A Critical Study of Science Fiction, Fantasy, Paranormal and Gothic Writings,* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2011)

[28] Wendy Pearson, *Alien Cryptographies: The View from Queer.* Science Fiction Studies, Vol 26(1) (1999) pp1-22.

[29] B. Attebery, *Strategies of fantasy.* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992)

relations can be presented uniquely and provocative […] But those same realms […] can also merely recapitulate homophobic and patriarchal tenets.'[30]

However, if this tension is so pivotal to much of the fantasy genre, then how can we as a field of study move beyond this into discussions of what queerness exists within subgenres, categories and motifs, as well as specific texts? First, we must track down a specific understanding not just of the term *queer*, but of queer theory as a whole. The phrase 'Queer Theory' was originally coined by Teresa de Lauretis (a Professor of The History of Consciousness) to serve as a provocative conference title. The word choice was inspired by the de Laurentis's experience hearing the word 'queer' used in a gay-affirmative sense by activists and members of the New York 1980s art scene -- in choosing to pair it with the 'academic holy word'[31] "theory", she created a massive talking point around the contemporary study known as "lesbian and gay studies". De Laurentis acknowledged in her opening the disruptive nature of the title and explained that she wished to unsettle the complacency and potential lack of nuance she saw in the emerging field derived from the titular implication that the lesbian and gay experience were inherently similar enough to devoid the need of either distinction nor the space for independent development from one another. She also wished to expand the field to include other ideas of queerness as well as introducing space for 'multiple differences into what had tended to be a monolithic, homogenising discourse of (homo)sexual difference, and to offer a possible escape from the hegemony of white, male, middle-class models of analysis.'[32] Queer theory as a term was

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[30], J. Battis (2007). 'Queer Spellings: Magic and Melancholy in Fantasy-Fiction' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 2007)

[31] David M. Halperin, *'The Normalisation of Queer Theory'* Journal of Homosexuality, Vol 45, Issue 2 (2003) p339

[32] Ibid.

therefore coined not so much to refer to an existing theory, but rather to mark out and call for a theoretical practice not yet developed. And yet, from the moment the term was uttered, it was treated as an established school of thought with specific doctrines and perspectives, despite its lack of actual theoretical content. Queer theory began to appear on bookstore shelves where it provided a break from the terms of "lesbian" and "gay" which were argued as reductive sexual descriptives. It also was framed as a harmonising point within the contemporary critique of feminist and gay/lesbian identity politics, lending credibility to the assumption that "queer" was some sort of further developed, postmodern identity and that study around the idea of "queerness" surpassed both feminism and lesbian/gay studies:

> 'Queer theory thereby achieved what lesbian and gay studies, despite its many scholarly and critical accomplishments, had been unable to bring about: namely, the entry of queer scholarship into the academy, the creation of jobs in queer studies, and the acquisition of academic respectability for queer work.'[33]

Even texts which have since been credited with the founding of queer theory (*Epistemology of the Closet* by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*) predated the theory and were retrospectively given this credit.

Inevitably, there are now consequences embedded into the very core of queer theory that came about due to its unusual development. As one essay explains, 'There is something [...] suspiciously odd about the rapidity with which queer theory -- whose claim to radical politics derived from its anti-assimilationist posture [rooted in its] embrace of the abnormal

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[33] Ibid.

and the marginal -- has been [...] absorbed into our (largely heterosexual) institutions of knowledge [in a way in which] lesbian and gay studies never were.'[34] Queer theory has, throughout the limited years of its existence, proven itself to prioritise the theory aspect over the queer, reducing the first half of its title to a harmless qualifier of the academically acceptable theory. In prioritising theory over queer, progressive academics have arguably reasoned that there is little unique or challenging to the branch, and that the theoretical research is merely an extension of what already occurs. Part of what allowed this to be so possible was the despecification and abstracting of the word 'queer', devoiding it from specific focus upon the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or other more direct contents of queerness and transforming it into a 'generic badge of subversiveness.' In doing this, the theory became so broadly progressive that anyone claiming to be progressive would have a vested interest, stripping away much of the nuance and specificity that a theoretical branch like queer theory ought to have. Rather than having specific branches of thought or focus upon 'subcategories' of queerness (i.e. having a specific establish branch considering lesbianism or transgender experiences), these are all written under a collective 'Queer Theory' with little regard to how wildly different these experiences are and can be -- perhaps it would not be unfair to claim that queer theory groups its topics less because of inherent similarities and more due to the knowledge that in most cases, those who oppose one are often almost predisposed to oppose the rest. Finally, due to its nature as a theory rather than a discipline, queer theory was applied to the different academic fields (sociology, history, literature etc.) rather than actively working with alongside and with them – if queer theory was treated instead as queer studies and therefore a discipline with its own autonomy, it would be better suited to adapting the differing needs one could have from the field

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[34] David M. Halperin, *'The Normalisation of Queer Theory',* p341

dependent on what it was being combined with. Once again, the limitations of confining it to a theory branch results in an overcrowded state with a higher chance of missed potential and limited nuance.

As we wrap up this introduction, I believe it is important to note that I am writing the essay as both a member of the LGBTQ community and a fan of both Hobb's work and the fantasy genre as a whole. As such, at times I will be drawing on my experiences as someone who engages within fandom spaces and culture, as well as someone who has experiences with identifying as queer both in terms of sexuality and gender. While my queer identity's influence on this project is pretty obvious, the time spent in fandom spaces is just as important, as it shaped this project into what is before you. It was fandom which introduced me to the *Realm of the Eldering's* series and it was fandom that showed me that other people saw the same comparisons, details and traits within these characters. In turn, my hope with essays like this, is to show more people how much insightful potential can be found in media and texts which are often dismissed, and to let the fans of these works know that they are not alone in appreciating this potential.

It is also this fandom identity to which I point to explain the limited references to Hobb that will occur throughout this text. While an author has a lot of sway over how a text is interpreted, given that they are the one to write it, this is not completely binding, nor something that a reader must listen to, even if their own experiences with the text suggest something different. Unfortunately for fans of *Realm of the Edlerings* who interpret Fitz as queer, however, Hobb has been vocally dismissive of this notion. In one online post she stated:

> To those who believe the Fool is male, having Fitz suddenly
>
> surrender his heterosexual preference doesn't seem to matter. If I wrote

a gay character and then had him convert to being straight so that some

readers could enjoy a 'happily ever after' scenario, I think people

would accuse me of having an agenda. After all, don't we all believe

that the 'right' girl could make a gay fellow go straight?

Of course we do! (Oh, and before someone happily quotes that

sentence somewhere, please know that is a Sarcasm.) Yet going the

other direction seems just fine to many readers who will bend, spindle

and mutilate Fitz any way they need to in order to reach the ending

they desire. [35]

This response was seen as quite harsh by a lot of these fans as she completely

dismissed the very detailed theorising that went into the notion. Furthermore, many of the

phrasings are antagonistic (for example, "before someone happily quotes that" comes across

overly defensive) and therefore unwelcoming to fans who were enjoying their engaging with

their own perspective – Hobb in particular seems to take issue with fanfictions engaging with

the potential couple as she references these stories often within the full post. As such, this

project will focus on the text rather than the author, in line more with the views of

reader-response theory[36], than classic scholarship which often draws on the author's

experiences to add extra context or evidence.

With that in mind, this project is also informally dedicated to everyone on Tumblr,

Reddit, fanforums or their own blogs, who has written far too much about their thoughts on a

series, character or theme, as well as everyone who ever reblogged any of my late night

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[35] *Repeat from the newsgroup,* Robin Hobb http://forums.theplenty.net/showthread. ... c#pid10338 [accessed 03/08/2024]

[36] According to reader-response theory, texts are simply 'object[s] of paper and ink until some reader responds to the marks on the page as verbal symbols'-- in other words, this means that the text's meaning comes from the reader, rather than existing as an inherent component of the text.

Tumblr rambles on the topic. Thank you for the everlasting support that characterises fandom and all your comments and suggestions (even the rude ones).

CHAPTER ONE: WIT AND SKILL

Robin Hobb's, *The Farseer Trilogy*, serves as the starting point of the widely

expansive and impressively long *Realm of the Eldering's* franchise, a fifteen-book series

whose publication spanned from 1995 to 2017. The story explores the journey of

FitzChivalry Farseer, the bastard son of the Crown Prince, Chivalry, of the Kingdom of the

Six Duchies. He is abandoned by his maternal grandfather, and handed over to the royal

family. His father forsakes his title in response to the shame brought by the revelation and

retreats to the countryside, never meeting his son, who stays with the main family, under the

care of Burrich, a fellow Witted person. Burrich attempts to raise the young boy, keeping him

safe and hidden from the politics of the castle, but Fitz eventually catches the attention of his

Grandfather, the King. He is brought under the tutelage of both the Master Assassin of the

Kingdom, Chade, by request of the King, and of the Royal SkillMaster Galen, due to the

coveted telepathic powers passed through the royal bloodline. This power is known as the

'Skill' and is treated by the Kingdom's culture as the socially celebrated, positive counterpart

to the demonised 'Wit'. On one hand, we have the ability known as 'Skill' -- Skill is a

telepathic power viewed as a gift belonging to the powerful to be wielded as part of their

noble duties and as such is typically perceived as a good talent to possess and harness. On the

other hand, there is the 'Wit' -- Wit is found throughout the Six Duchies and is viewed as a

disruption to the natural order, which, according to Burrich, renders men 'less than man'.[37][38]

As Fitz progresses in his training, so too does his natural predisposition towards the magical

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[37] Robin Hobb, Assassin's Apprentice (London, Harper Collins: 2014) p. 36.

[38] While there is also the existence of Hedge-witches within the world, these are considered 'low-magic' and their 'magic' operates through the use of amulets and trinkets, unlike the other prominent magic forms existing as both Skill and Wit are derived from within oneself, rather than using items which are themselves potentially magic. Due to this distinction, the hedge-witches are not really viewed to be part of the magic system, nor will they be considered within the essay.

gift known as 'Wit'. It is this binary magical system within which much of the queerness of both the characters and the world begins to be established. As such, we shall begin with outlining the ways in which Hobb builds up this binary through framing and character interactions, before exploring the disruption Fitz brings to it. Throughout this chapter, I shall be engaging with the work of scholars like Peter Melville as well as numerous theorists, belonging to both queer theory as well as psychoanalytic theory. Through this, I intend to further the work of Melville, whose essay '*Queerness and Homophobia in Robin Hobb's Farseer Trilogy*' served as a starting point for a lot of the arguments presented here. This will predominantly focus on engaging with Melville's considerations of Fitz's relationship to the closet, which I will extend to Burrich as well as bringing in other viewpoints such as Kristeva's idea of abjection to explore the lesson Burrich passes on to Fitz. While Melville focuses this on a class interpretation, as shall be seen in the following chapter, I will draw this towards its queerer interpretation and how that relates to both Fitz and Burrich's experiences with the Wit. This chapter will also build upon this work by engaging with the idea of internalised homophobia as both a form of abjection and as well as an example of shame as a contagion and something which is taught, rather than a natural state. It is the aim of this chapter to take these arguments and flesh them out further by engaging in close readings of the texts, as well as applying the approaches of various theorists to the questions at hand.

As a starting point, it is important to understand that Fitz, as a character, is one who has been inherently born in, and confined to, the liminal spaces between acceptance and banishment. He both possesses a power that is desirable and one which is not; his very birth is the result of one of the highest noblemen and an unknown, peasant woman coming together. Fitz is often trapped within opposites, existing in contradictory spaces of duality

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when the world around him insists on singularity -- he is both bastard and royal, a symbol of shame and a trusted pawn, a wielder of wit and of skill. Even without exploring his complex relationship with gender and sexuality, which shall be tackled more within the next chapter, he is a character surrounded and defined by a sense of duality through this constant distortion of the binary. It is this constant duality that renders him such a complex character to study -- when his status is so blurred by questions of class, power, gender and sexuality. He is almost always the character of both extremes.

None of this, however, inherently renders him as a bisexual character. It is important to make this clarification as any discussions around the characters' sexualities and genders will occur in the following chapters. This chapter is focused upon taking a closer look at the magic system and its binary, specifically in regards to how this is utilised by Hobb to explore stories of internalised hatred, outcasted-hood and acceptance. There is much within the text to suggest that the magic system acts as a form of substitute alterity, or in other words, as an allegorical representation of the queer experience. This notion of substitute alterity comes from Anne Balay's article, *"Incloseto Putbacko": Queerness in Adolescent Fantasy Fiction*, which considers, much in line with this thesis, the way in which much of fantasy tackles the exploration of queerness through a focus on its enforced invisibility. According to Balay, many examples of queerness in adolescent fantasy are either hidden away (from either the audience or the world of the characters), or presented in a state of hyper-romanticism which renders the supposed representation ineffectual as representation as it doesn't show the humanity of the queer love, but instead paints a perfect, sanitised picture. 'Substitute alterity' as a term was therefore developed by Balay as a way to refer to the understanding that a text may be 'queered' 'by identifying how it transfers the stigma of queerness into some other,

alien culture.'[39] This was specifically thought of by Balay in regards to Lynn Flewelling's

Nightrunner series, which simultaneously explores the notion of a different culture which

stands in place of the queer community (the Aurenfaie, or 'faie' whose culture's defining

traits read as a list of gay stereotypes) while also featuring a gay couple (Alec and Seregil)

who are central to the story, both of whom are faie as well as being gay. As Balay explains;

> When Pugh and Wallace spend time fleshing out how wizards and werewolves in the
>
> Harry Potter series resemble gay folks, their argument becomes increasingly
>
> plausible—and fascinating—with each parallel they identify. But for Alec and Seregil,
>
> there isn't this substitution—they are faie and they are gay. And the heavy-handedness
>
> of the pun makes the irony (gay = faie = fey) inescapable. On some level, Flewelling's
>
> series is about the process by which queerness is represented in fantasy fiction by
>
> some substitute alterity[40]

Within the world Balay was considering, the directness of the substitution of 'faie'

culture in the place of gay culture helps to render Flewelling's series into a criticism of

fantasy unwillingness to stray from the heteronormativity of our world. As is alluded to

within the above quote, both of the strategies outlined (parallels or direct substitutions) have

their advantages and places. Oftentimes, parallels become muddied or lost within a series,

unable to take a central position in the story, something which the act of substitution helps to

avoid, though it risks losing the nuance and becoming 'heavy-handed' at points. A similar

notion of substitution occurs within the *Farseer Trilogy*, which we shall explore within this

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[39] Anne Balay, '"Incloseto Putbacko": Queerness in Adolescent Fantasy Fiction', *The Journal of Popular Culture,* Vol 45, No 5 (Wiley Periodicals Inc: 2012)

[40] Balay, '"Incloseto Putbacko" Queerness in Adolescent Fantasy Fiction' p934

chapter. Though less direct and 'heavy-handed' than Flewelling's series, Hobbs's approach to the substitution of Wit (and, to vary degrees, magic as a whole) in the place of queerness allows for the nuances afforded by parallels to emerge while still allowing the concept to remain a strong driving force within the narrative.

In the case of Hobb's *Farseer Trilogy*, we don't have the certainty around Fitz's sexuality, but we do still have this use of 'some other, alien culture'[41] which draws many parallels to the queer community, especially how it was presented and perceived at the time of the publication. During the 1990s', when the publication of this series began, queer characters were rarely afforded recurring or leading roles within American mainstream culture and the few instances of them being given such a centre stage were seen as simultaneously groundbreaking and controversial. For example, as Melville's gestures towards in his exploration of *Queerness and Homosexuality in Robin Hobb's Farseer Trilogies,*[42] Hollywood only produced one major film around queerness, which was 1993's *Philadelphia*[43], starring Tom Hanks. While documentaries like *The Celluloid Closet*[44] and *Paris is Burning*[45] signify a turn towards queer stories being granted a space, much like the also burgeoning 'New Queer Cinema'[46] movements that developed within the independent cinema space, these more niche subsections were ultimately limited in their reach, unlike

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Peter Melville, 'Queerness and Homophobia in Robin Hobb's Farseer Trilogies' *Extrapolation,* Vol 59, No 3 (2018) p281

[43] *Philadelphia* by dir. Jonathan Demme (Tristar Pictures, 1993)

[44] *The Celluloid Closet* by dir. Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, (Sony Picture Classics, 1996)

[45] *Paris is Burning* by dir. Jennie Livingstone (Off-White Productions 1990)

[46] B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema,* BFI
https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/new-queer-cinema-b-ruby-rich
(25 June 2017)(accessed 29/11/2023)

Hollywood produced pieces, like *Philadelphia.* These tales notably tended to focus upon narratives around the notion of the 'closet' - be that stories of those living within it, or narratives about coming out, showing that these concepts were not only among the dominant thoughts around queerness but also that they were among the most recognisable parts of the queer experience to the wider American culture.[47]

This same kind of framing that can be seen present in *The Farseer Trilogy* in regards to the magic system established in the universe. Fitz has been described as a character who is 'born *out of the closet'*.[48] While this term was originally used in reference to his bastard nature -- a nature by which his life is defined by, with even his first memory (his abandonment by his grandfather) reflecting this -- this description can be applied more aptly to his experiences with his magic. The first time the reader is presented with Fitz's ability with Wit in an active manner is when he is a young child being verbally harassed by a grown man in the courtyard of Buckkeep Castle. The man stands over him, never truly speaking to the child. He opens the 'conversation' by asking the six-year old boy 'You the bastid, hey?'[49], a question to which Fitz can only nod as he considers how he had heard the word 'enough to know it meant [him]'[50] but without understanding what it was people were calling him. Upon the confirmation of Fitz's identity (the only identity most know him by for the majority of the first book), the man immediately turns away from the child and begins playing to the crowd of passing people, drawing them in with his insistent questioning of 'whose your mother?',

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[47] Other prominent examples of queer representation in the 1990s that show this same focus on a narrative of 'coming out' or being 'outed' include the characters of Nancy Bartlett on *Roseanne* (1988-1997) and Rickie Vasquez from *My So-Called Life* (1994-1995)

[48] Melville, Queerness and Homophobia in Robin Hobb's Farseer Trilogies, p284

[49] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice*, p22-23

[50] Ibid.

'doesn't he look like Chivalry?' and 'what's your name? He doesn't have a name.'[51] As the man pushes further and further, Fitz's fear and pain passively transfer into Nosy, the small pup with whom he is Wit-bonded. Wit-bonding refers to the bond between a person and an animal, where they form a telepathic link between the two that intertwines their thoughts, feelings and sense of self with one another. As Fitz's emotions bleed into the pup, Nosy responds by 'dropping over onto his side and show[ing] his belly [...] in that ancient canine signal that always means, 'I'm only a puppy, I cannot defend myself. Have mercy.'[52] It is only when the fear of the dog and the child is gone unnoticed by the adults around them, that Fitz's magic explodes forward;

> '"No!" I shouted and repelled at him [...] I saw him stagger a step backwards, losing his grip on his cask so that it fell to the cobbled path and cracked open. No one in the crowd could have understood what had happened. I certainly didn't. For the most part, folk laughed to see a grown man cower back from a child.'[53]

This is the first demonstration we witness of what Fitz is capable of and we can see the Wit for what it truly is - instinctive. The magic in this scene is derived from the fear of a small boy cornered by an older man, and as such, is inherently defensive and protective. There is no goal to harm or to even truly weaponise the power, it is simply the story of a child, who feels, and is, trapped by someone with inherent power over him, who responds in the only way available to him. At the time of this display, the notion of Wit is unknown to Fitz and the audience, and even the concept of Wit-bonding has yet to be treated with suspicion as the

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[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

reader is only seeing through the view of Fitz who has yet to be taught this is 'wrong'. It takes another 12 pages for these concepts to be identified and explained to Fitz and the readers, an act which comes from Burrich, one of the only other Wit-wielders the reader is introduced to.

When we do get to the explanation of the power, it seems to fly directly in contrast to these demonstrations. What we are shown is childhood innocence around a powerful emotional connection and an instinctual need to protect and defend. What Burrich teaches Fitz, however, is;

'The Wit … it's the power of the beast blood just as the Skill comes from the line of Kings. It starts out like a blessing, giving you the tongues of the animals. But then it seizes you and draws you down, makes you a beast like the rest of them. Until finally there's not a shred of humanity in you [...] Until no man could look on you and think you had ever been a man.'[54]

The description here is intense and carries a tone of pain with Burrich seemingly imagining Fitz -- the young child whose life he cares for -- stripped of his identity and humanity, and sent to a state Burrich blatantly fears, a state of being less than human. Furthermore, with the knowledge revealed in the second book, that Burrich himself wields Wit, it becomes clear that this is a fear deeply embedded in him. Burrich as a character is one who takes great pride and finds great value in being a 'man' and as such, cannot handle the idea of potentially having that identity stripped from him. It is revealed that as a young man, Burrich developed

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[54] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p37

and tragically lost two different Wit-bonds. By the time he had met Chivalry, Fitz's father and

Burrich's close friend, Burrich was already beginning to close himself off from these bonds,

which ended up coinciding with Chivalry's lessons to Burrich on 'man's values'.[55] The

blending of identities and the disillusionment of the barrier between what is human and what

is not, is something which Burrich deeply fears, more than any other part of the power -- even

parts which seem more weaponizable. It is such a strong fear that he, rather ironically,

suppresses the Wit, a part of his identity, in the name of protecting his identity as a whole.

With this understanding, it becomes clear that Burrich's fear is ultimately that of the

abject. Coined by Julia Kristeva, abjection refers to the state of being cast off -- specifically

in regards to the separation between a child's developing sense of self and the maternal

'other'. Described as a 'violent, clumsy breaking away'[56] which is characterised by a

'constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling'[57], this

experience of separation and assertion of one's own state of being and identifying, is framed

by Kristeva as an inherently traumatising yet necessary state of development, one which

leaves us forever marked by the experience; as such, when we encounter something perceived

to threaten this assertion of our 'clean and proper' self, we are flooded with a sense of

discomfort and fear around this potential disruption of our sense of self. This psychoanalytic

theory applies directly to the concept of Wit-bonds and Burrich's perception of them; Burrich

repeatedly expresses concerns over being made 'a beast', no longer identifiable as a man. In

these expressed concerns, it is made clear to the reader that Burrich's real fear, and the source

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[55] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest,* (London, Harper Collins, 2014) p21

[56] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, Columbia Univeristy Press: 1982) p13

[57] Ibid.

of his expressed hatred of Wit, is tied to this idea of having his identity so thoroughly disturbed. His identity is defined by a sense of 'manhood', shaped by the lessons in weaponry and other "man's values"[58] that Chivalry instilled in him. When, in *Assassin's Quest*, Burrich speaks of his own history, there is a noticeable difference in tone and language when he speaks of himself before and after Chivalry's involvement in his life. The version of himself that existed before Chivalry is described as a "thieving, unkempt scoundrel"[59], who Chivalry "taught [...] to be a man, not a beast in a man's shape."[60] In this quote, the tone regarding Burrich himself shifts from negative and dismissive about the identity that he had come to know, into something filled with a sense of wonder at what Chivalry had managed to achieve with him. As such, with every potential connection to an animal, there is the threat of having the identity he has struggled for so long to assert, and that exists as one of his last remaining bonds to Chivalry, being overthrown in the name of the animals. Burrich's fear, therefore, is the fear of one who carries the ability, rather than of an outsider, though this context is not provided until the next book. As such, when he focuses on the Wits 'the tongues of the animals'[61], it is from the perspective of one talking about that which is most tempting to him. As a man who has dedicated his life to the care of animals, a behaviour which he fell into because of his bond with them, the memory of this bond and how it helped in his work would be understandably and constantly tempting to him. This focus, however, comes at the expense of noting the other abilities Wit provides, such as being able to act as a defensive force or allowing one to sense the life forces of others.

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[58] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest* p21

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p37

This focus is mimicked by the very storytelling of Fitz's life. The Farseer Trilogy is told from the perspective of an older version of Fitz, who is attempting to write down a history of the Six Duchies. However, he finds his attention constantly interrupted by the realisation of the role he has played in the politics of the kingdom. As such, he gives into the distraction, recognising the importance his birth and subsequent decisions played in the political landscape. Because of this framing, the reader's perspective of Wit is inherently shaped by Fitz's, as seen at the start of the book where, as long as Fitz is left unaware about the 'weirdness' of his connection with Nosy, the reader too accepts it as just as a feature of this world. As such, because Fitz draws comfort from the bonds he develops with Nosy, and later, Smithy and Nighteyes, the bond is the defining detail of the Wit, over the others. It is also this bond, as seen in Burrichs comments though, that is the most demonised. The idea of dangerous, 'unnatural' bonds, is one which runs close to a lot of homophobic rhetoric in a way that draws together the concepts of magic and queerness and seemingly suggests that they are fundamentally similar. Fitz does not view his connection with Nosy as strange or wrong -- it comes naturally to him, and with no-one telling him (until the bond has already formed) that there is something 'wrong' with it, he has no reason to consider it as an issue. We can see this as a demonstration of Butler's notions of performativity, specifically developmental law and the idea that the rules of gender and sexuality come about as 'regulatory ideals' for us to 'perform' to uphold order, rather than fundamental, descriptive truths about the world. In this instance, the 'law' (i.e. the understanding that wit is 'wrong') is not yet in place from Fitz's view so he cannot perform in line with it. Only once the rule is implemented within his life, can he begin to follow through with the socially necessitated performance -- similarly to how young children may act out of line with what society expects from their assigned sex/gender. Fitz's 'childhood innocence' around the Wit-bond can also

be argued as another assertion of the connection between the Wit and the abject. One of the first identifiable characteristics of Wit in a young child is the delay it places upon a child's development of language.

According to Kristeva, prior to the actual incident of abjection, the child exists in a state known as the Chora, which is defined as a pre-language state made up of a chaotic mix of perceptions. While the Fitz that first arrives at Buckkeep Castle doesn't display this, as his bond with Nosy develops and the barriers between himself and Nosy disintegrate, Fitz is sent back towards a more Chora-like state. Throughout Burrich's confrontation of Fitz's ability, there are multiple lines that draw attention to how little Fitz now speaks -- "I didn't speak" and "I shook my head mutely" as examples.[62] However, as a young child forcefully devoid of a maternal presence in his life (with his grandfather taking him away, and Fitz being left with no memory of his mother) Fitz does not identify this devolution, nor does it seem to disturb him once pointed out. Instead, he takes comfort in the bond it provides him, much in the same way Burrich once did before he found bonds that solidified and reaffirmed his identity outside of the animals and the maternal.

With Kristeva's theory in mind, this seems to render the Wit-bonds as an inherently disruptive force to one's identity and therefore a negative connection. However, in the case of Fitz, as he does not experience the fear of the abject, this interpretation does not hold as much weight as it does when considering Burrich. As such, the bond that Fitz experiences and finds comfort in, is much more comparable to the importance of community within queer spaces. The significance of the role that community serves in people's lives has long since been known, with multiple avenues exploring the different ways in which to build, and encourage

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[62] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p35

the building of, community. Defined by Hillery, community was once seen as referring to a group of people engaged in social interaction within a geographical area.[63] Since then, there has been a shift within the ways in which community is defined, away from spatial proximity and towards a focus on social exchange as the essential characteristic.[64] Community can be defined as "those things which people have in common, which bind them together, and give them a sense of belonging with one another." It is this sense of belonging which has lent community its importance, as humans carry an inherent need and desire to find their place in the world, often thought of through the lens of finding their own group of people. This sense of belonging is particularly important for marginalised groups, like the LGBTQ community, to search for and carve out, given the unwillingness often displayed by heteronormative society to grant queer people this sense within wider society.[65] With this perspective in mind, the vilification of one of the only bonds to ever truly bring Fitz comfort takes on a new meaning, as does his unwillingness to part from the bond, even as the lenses of shame begin to sink in from him.

Returning to the scene of Fitz's very first condemnation, it is interesting to note that one of Burrich's first actions is to establish a separation between the child and the pup in order to explain, only to one, what is wrong. Nosy, the pup, is directed to stay on the ground by Burrich's boots, while Fitz is lifted onto the bench that Burrich is sitting on. While in the real world, this distinction may not seem too important -- the dog sits on the floor, the child

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[63] G. A. Hillery, . "Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement." *Rural Sociology* (1955) p111-123.

[64] R. D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.* (New York: Simon & Schuster: 2000)

[65] For more information and breakdown of the reasons behind this, see Eleanor Formby's book, *Exploring LGBT Spaces and Communities: Contrasting Identities, Belongings and Wellbeing* (New York, Routledge: 2017)

on the human chairs -- it is shown to go against the bonded pairs instincts; Fitz, alone, is called over and yet, Nosy automatically follows. To the pair, where one goes, the other follows. This immediate separation by Burrich, and the places he puts them into, therefore speak of more than just literal placement, but of an active endeavour to separate the two emotionally and in terms of standing. By placing the emphasis on the beast and it perceived potential to overwrite humanity within his speech, Burrich can be viewed as displaying an unintentional disposition to blame and demonise the animal over the man; after all, the power is described to "'[seize] you and [draw] you down, [making] you a beast *like the rest of them*."[66] In stating that the 'curse' of Wit will make one 'a beast like the rest of them'[67], the blame, arguably, is placed on the animal more than it is the human, even though the human is the one to initiate the bond. As such, Nosy is relegated to the lower position of the ground and forcefully reminded of the typical social hierarchy, while Fitz is deprived of any choice and instead lifted upon the bench and placed on the same level as Burrich.

With this understanding, the bond could be perceived as a form of temptation, with the one side tricking and forcing the other into the development of so-called 'unnatural' bonds and condemning themselves to damnation. This parallels certain homophobic rhetoric around the idea that the queer community (especially gay men) would tempt and manipulate others into stepping off of the 'morally righteous' path. In 1993, two years prior to the first publication of the *Assassin's Apprentice,* members of the United States House of Representatives debated the topic of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people in the military. Colorado Democrat, Patricia Schroeder argued that the law and its lawmakers should not be

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[66] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p37 [*my italics*]

[67] Ibid.

basing public policy decisions upon stereotypes; Retired Brigadier General, William Weise, –
a well-respected military figure of the time – repeatedly interrupted Schroeder in order to put
forward his own, stereotypical, views of gay men in military environments:

>"The point is, if you put homosexuals in a situation like that – and in a
>study that I [have] seen, less than 2 percent claim celibacy – it is like putting a
>hungry dog in a meat shop. It is like putting a fox guarding a hen coop. It just
>doesn't make sense." [68]

For many years, this notion of temptation and predatory behaviour has been a pervasive idea
used to condemn gay men as well as the queer community as a whole, as it both serves as
condemnation as well as a way for those with hypocritical standards or internalised
homophobia to rationalise exceptions to the espoused opinions -- so long as one resists the
temptation, they can still be argued as morally pure and on the right path and if they do
occasionally 'slip', the blame is on the tempter, not the tempted.

Throughout the story, this idea of temptation and inevitable damnation is questioned
by Hobb as the narrative explores the abilities that Fitz continues to instinctively wield -- he
does not immediately internalise the shame and hatred Burrich attempts to instil. We, as the
readers, see throughout the tale the bond between Fitz and his various animal companions,
none of which threatened to forcefully strip him of his humanity in the way Burrich
describes. Even when Fitz is at his most free with his Wit-bond, the narrator version of Fitz

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[68] House Armed Services Committee, *Policy Implications of Lifting the Ban on Homosexuals in the Military:* Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives (103rd Cong. 1). (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.1993)

speaks of having had an awareness of himself and his bond as a two who are connected. This awareness exists in contrast to the fear express by Burrich -- rather than having been lost between the two identities and seeing them as one, Fitz states:

"And through it all, Nosy was at my side, so bonded to me now that I seldom separated my mind completely from his. I used his nose, his eyes and his jaws as freely as my own, and never thought it the least bit strange."[69].

The very language used within this quote, even though it is talking about the intertwined nature of the connection between the boy and the pup, ultimately serves to demonstrate the distinction between the two. Fitz's use of the first-person perspective operates in contrast not only to Burrich's speech about Wit, but also in contrast to the bond with Nosy. This first person perspective is also present throughout the texts, and serves as an assertion of Fitz's own identity within himself throughout the text, despite the many bonds that, under the view expressed by Burrich, come close to threatening this idea of self. In stating that they were "so bonded [...] that [he] seldom separated [his] mind completely" from Nosy's, Fitz reveals some fundamental details about the Wit which call into question Burrichs words.[70] From this quote we can discern that not only does Fitz maintain agency and the ability to distinguish the

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[69] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice*, p33

[70] While it can be argued that this is reflective of the Older version of Fitz who is narrating and may have gained the ability to understand this distinction with age, I believe this perspective ignores what we know of how Fitz came to be writing down this story. In trying to chronicle the history of the Six Duchies, he found his own emotions, opinions and perspectives from his childhood to be too overwhelming to remain objective in his writing. He is essentially overtaken by a past that he hadn't been able to process and as such can't help but write it down as it comes to him in order to finally process and document it all. The writing of this story, from Fitz's perspective, is framed as an immediate and cathartic emotional release. It would therefore be more consistent with this notion if the views expressed in these quotes were reflective of Fitz at the time, since the premise was that he was so overwhelmed by what had been left unaddressed from his past. Furthermore, the wit is repeatedly shown to be an intuitive power, one which doesn't need much training to harness, which again lends credence to the idea that Fitz could always control how connected they were.

two when he desires too, we also see that, when choosing to separate their minds, Fitz has the option to control how intensely they are devoid of each other. Even during this period, in which his connection has yet to be identified, or interfered with, by outside parties, and in which Fitz himself states that he saw nothing strange about the bond, nor any real need to separate the pair, by using the word 'seldom' the reader learns that he does, in fact, seemingly separate the two, not just bit a small margin, by completely at times.

And yet, Burrich's response to Fitz's power is based on his own interpretation and as such, is nothing short of painful to read, as the young child is forced into a state of fear for his closest friend, the most important bond in his life, all in the name of Burrich's belief that Fitz must have his humanity saved from the Wit-bond. Having spotted the child running through the town with his friends and, inevitably, the pup at heel, Burrich is forced to confront himself with the reality of what Fitz – the child he is raising – has been getting up to while he has been unaware. He stops the child, forcing him to a standstill as he pays off the man from whom the kids had stolen from, before sending Fitz home with a quick command. Rather, however, than coming to Fitz soon after and talking to him in a reasonable manner, Burrich instead stays out for the rest of the afternoon, through the evening and into the night. When he does eventually return, it is in a drunken state during which he demands Fitz attention before threatening both the child and the pup:

> "[This is a] Dog whip. [..] A teaching device. When you get a pup that won't mind -- when you say to a pup "come here", and the pup refuses to come -- well, a few sharp lashes from this and the pup learns to listen and obey the first time." [..]

He spoke casually as he lowered the whip and let the short lash dance lightly over the floor. Neither Nosy nor I could take our eyes off it, and when he suddenly flipped the whole object at Nosy, the pup gave a yelp of terror and leaped back from it, and then rushed to cower behind me."[71]

Burrich's display here serves as a form of test -- something which he quickly clarifies after this, Burrich states that he never uses the whip on the pups and as such, by all rights, Nosy shouldn't know what it is, especially not enough to fear the supposed teaching device. With this knowledge, it becomes clear to both the characters, as well as the readers, that Nosy's fear is derived from Fitz's own emotional response to the weapon. What is not, however, clear to the reader, at the time of this scene, is why such a harsh test is, in Burrich's eyes, required. Though he goes on to explain his perspective of Wit, detailing it as a curse that strips a man's humanity, his immediate emotional response upon seeing Nosy's fear, seems to hint to more as he seemingly almost collapses onto the bench, all while saying "Oh Eda, I guessed, I suspected [...] but damn El's eyes, I didn't want to be right. I didn't want to be right."[72] The use of not just one, but two emotive and exclamatory phrases here is worth noting as Burrich is often framed as a reserved and dutiful man, the kind who is unlikely to use such language in any situation he doesn't feel is dire enough to need it.

However, as we have already discussed, he is also a Wit-wielder, and one who hates and fears himself for it. With this in mind, and building upon the idea that Burrich's relationship to the Wit is akin to the fear of the abject, we can also consider it as a fear of

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[71] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p35

[72] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice*, p36

one's own identity, similar to internalised homophobia. While it is not until this second book where Fitz begins to speak of his own fear about his gift, and the potential receptions that await him should it be discovered, it is, as we have already seen, from Burrich whom he first learns that there is something 'wrong' with him. Burrich passes down the shame he himself has long since lived with -- even within his opening break down in which he recognises the bond between child and pup for what it truly is, though his tone may seem to carry regret and upset for Fitz, his words of "damn El's eyes, I didn't want to be right" and "unless you'd been sharing minds with him"[73] nevertheless carry with them the condemnation of Fitz's behaviour; a behaviour which comes to him "as [naturally]... as any man can claim".[74]

This shame about something so innate to Burrich's identity finds its closest real-world comparison in the idea of internalised homophobia and the subsequent sense of shame brought about by the phenomenon. First appearing in psychological literature in the early 1980s,[75] the concept of internalised homophobia has evolved and developed further nuance and understanding, especially in the immediate and subsequent aftermath of the AIDS crisis. One of the definitions that has come about for the term which best reflects this nuance describes internalised homophobia as "the feelings of devaluation and internal conflicts which arise from the internalisation and [incorporation] of negative social attitudes (heterosexist) around homosexuality into one's beliefs."[76] This definition is based upon three, core basis': first, the existence of powerful societal attitudes, namely the embedded homophobic attitudes born from a hetero-normative social environment which is hostile to

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[73] Ibid.

[74] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest,* p606

[75] AK Malyon 'Psychotherapeutic implications of internalised homophobia in GayMen' *Journal Of Homosexuality* Vol 7 No 2 pp 59–69 (1982)

[76] DM Frost & IH Meyer 'Internalised homophobia and relationship quality among lesbians, gaymen, and bisexuals' ,in *Journal of Counseling Psychology,* Vol 56 No 1, pp 97–109. (2009)

anything perceived as a threat to the status quo. Secondly, the existence of constant reminders of this hostility towards sexual minorities to create and reinforce the internalised acceptance that their identity is abnormal by societal standards. Finally, there is the existence of feelings within members of sexual minorities of discontent and discomfort caused by the internalisation of these messages.

Each of the stages is mirrored within the world of the Farseer Trilogy and the relationship shown between society and Wit-wielders. Firstly, as readers, we know from Burrich's early references to the legality of hunting and killing children suspected of possessing Wit, that there is a societal condemnation beyond Burrich around the possession of Wit. This is further reinforced by Burrich's warnings to Fitz when Fitz begins training under the Royal SkillMaster, Galen. Burrich recounts the story of a young girl, who "had a way with birds"[77], who is told to have done nothing but good, and whom Galen is rumoured to have killed, simply for the possession of Wit. While Burrich refuses to confirm Galen's involvement directly, his response that Galen's horse had been out of the stable all night before the young girls dead body was discovered is telling -- as is people's unwillingness to step up despite the obviousness of the culprit, given Galen's public declaration of the young girl as an 'abomination'.[78] Second -- while there are not many demonstrations within the Farseer Trilogy, especially in regards to the first two books, of society actively condemning Wit and its wielders in a reinforcing manner, this is predominantly due to Fitz's secrecy around his ability, as instructed by Burrich. Burrich, however, as the first to know about Fitz's power, provides these constant reminders -- outside of the confrontation scene which has

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[77] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p213

[78] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p214

been the main focus of this chapter, other comments from Burrich such as "you won't pervert my beasts that way. Or degrade Chivalry's blood"[79] provide regular reprimands. Just five pages after this comment from Burrich, Fitz, upon considering letting Molly, his oldest friend know about his ability (as a result of interpreting all bonds through the lens of the Wit and believing Molly may be able to understand him as they shared an emotional bond together), comments that he was ultimately unable to bridge that gap and share the information with her: "But I feared if I asked her, I might reveal myself as I had to Chade, or that she might be disgusted by it as I knew Burrich would be."[80] With just these two quotes, the third and final point comes into play. Though Fitz never gives up his Wit, much to Burrich's chagrin, his uncertainty about revealing it to others is on clear display in his reluctance to risk telling Molly anything. The specific reference to his accidental ability revelation to Chade is articularly important as Chade has a noticeable *lack* of reaction to the reveal. As such, the fact that Fitz makes specific reference to, and expresses a sense of fear around, the idea of accidentally revealing this part of his identity again, reveals that it is not just a repeat of Burrich's disgust at Fitz behaviour he fears. Having been brought up with constant references and reminders that his identity has long since been condemned by the Six Duchies as a killable offence, Fitz is left with a deep-seated sense of shame around the idea of anyone finding out about him. What he is, he has been told, is wrong, unnatural, abnormal. This parallels a majority of homophobic rhetoric in western society, especially the more religiously influenced comments which draw upon the heteronormative standard seen to be set out in the Bible, in order to exclude queer people from society. Eventually, Fitz is unable to truly escape internalising this narrative he has been raised with, much in the same way

[79] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p175

[80] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p180

queer children raised in homophobic environments are often unable to emerge unscathed by the rhetoric they are fed. He has become indoctrinated within the cycle of shame and self-hatred.

Shame can be 'particularly contagious' even as it is 'peculiarly individuating'.[81] Shame functions on a premise of exposure -- 'another see what I have done that is bad'[82] and now I must 'turn away'[83] in shame. As such, it is a particularly binding emotion, where simply suspecting that someone else will consider an action bad, regardless of your own opinions and beliefs, may ignite it; this also makes it particularly suited to being spread about, especially unintentionally. All it truly requires is the knowledge that you may have 'failed', especially in the eyes of another, for shame to begin. This creates a deep sense of isolation, as 'shame involves [...] not only the bodily surface, but also [...] the subject's relation to itself.'[84] As Sartre argues, 'I am ashamed of what I *am*'[85] and 'I am ashamed of myself *as I appear* to the Other.'[86] It is the shame, and how it relates to other's perceptions of us that ultimately comes between Molly and Fitz in the scene above, as it does with many of the potential bonds Fitz could form throughout his life -- the very shame Burrich spread to him. If we once again return to Burrich's original condemnation of Fitz, we can see the depth

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[81] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's The Art of the Novel." Gay Shame. Ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009. 49–63. Print

[82] Sara Ahmed, Chapter Five: Shame Before Others, '*The Cultural Politics of Emotion',* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2014) p103

[83] Ibid.

[84] Ahmed, p104

[85] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans.H.E. Barnes (London, Routledge: 1996) p221

[86] Sartre, p222

of this shame as it existed in Burrich. While Burrich spends the majority of his speech about the Wit seemingly placing the blame on the animals, who symbolise the temptation of such a bond, it is this first, more emotional comment, that places the agency and therefore, the blame, upon Fitz -- "unless *you'd* been sharing minds".[87] This can be seen as reflective of Burrichs own guilt about Wit; after all, for a man who wishes to have nothing to do with his 'curse'[88], a curse for which he views the main temptation to be the bonding and the symbol of that temptation to be the animals one can bond with, he has nonetheless lived the majority of his life taking care of animals whenever he can.

The unintentional hypocrisy of this, for which Burrich carries a lot of his guilt around the power he so deeply hates, is emphasised as the narrator-Fitz makes it clear to the readers on multiple occasions that Burrich still connects and bleeds his emotions into the animals under his care, both through the ability and through physical manifestations. Burrich is referred to by the animals under his care, specifically one dog called Vixen, who seems to have a special connection to Burrich, as being the 'Heart of the Pack'. This makes it clear to the reader that, intentionally or otherwise, Burrich is still connecting with these animals beyond what would simply come about from his job. Furthermore, when Chivalry Farseer dies, Burrichs response to the death is intense, beyond that which is expected of him -- even with the knowledge that Burrich and his master, Chivalry, had a close bond and friendships, with Burrich having served as Chivalry's for many years, during which Burrich serves as Chivalry's 'Kings Man' (a role that requires a close connection and trust as Burrich was quite literally giving his energy to his Prince in order for Chivalry to use his Skill), Burrich's

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[87] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p36

[88] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p37

response was viewed improper. Within the culture of the Six Duchies, cutting one's hair was often used to signify a state of mourning, with different lengths and extents representative of differing kinds of mourning. When Burrich cuts Fitz' hair to only a finger length, though dramatic, it can, societally, be excused as the mourning of a son for his father. What Burrich does to himself, as well as to the horse he cares for, has no such societal obligation, as is made clear when Regal sends a man to reprimand Burrich, who now has no hair, not even his beard or his eyebrows left -- "That was mourning for a crowned King, not for a man who had abdicated the throne".[89] Continuing this intense response, Burrich cuts a lock of hair from each horse's mane, something which no one brings to Regal's attention, seemingly out of a sense of horror at the intensity of Burrich's emotions. This act of cutting from the horse's manes as well as his own hair reads as Burrich treating the animals under his care as extensions of himself and his own emotions, in a manner not dissimilar to the Wit-Bond. As such, Burrich himself could be perceived as a character at war with his instincts and the bonds they create, and the shame he has internalised from both society and the trauma he has had inflicted upon him through his so-called 'curse' -- namely, the tragic demises of his two confirmed Wit-Bonds, a canine called Slash and a Horse known as Neko, both of which he was able to keenly feel as though it was happening to him.

Furthering this sense of guilt within Burrich, it becomes apparent in his discussion with Fitz that he has forgotten details of the Wit that as a Wit-wielder, he ought to know -- this act suggests an effort by Burrich to further distance himself mentally from the power and any acknowledgements that he possesses it, most likely as a way to compensate for his inability to truly cut it from his life, despite his words, due to the instinctive nature of the

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[89] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p109

power as well as his profession. He asks Fitz "Who taught you to do this?"[90], despite being aware that the ability and the bond is an instinctual ability, especially for a young child like Fitz. He once again utilises a lot of language reminiscent of homophobic rhetoric in order to pass this guilt and shame down to Fitz. As well as referring to the bond as "unnatural", Hobb also includes the idea that otherness and maturity are often linked by those who are distrusting or hateful of the otherness:

'"You don't speak like a child. But I've heard that was the way of it, with those who had the old Wit. That from the beginning, they were never truly children. They always knew too much, and as they got older, they knew even more. That was why it was never accounted a crime, in the old days, to hunt them down and burn them."[91]

In this quote, there is an underlying sentiment that those who are 'other' are incapable of being children, even when they are in the child stages of life. Though Burrich only directly states that Fitz doesn't "speak like a child", the rapid escalation within this quote to the idea that hunting, murdering and burning witted-children was legal (or at least treated as legal -- the phrasing 'never accounted a crime' leaves some room for interpretation as to whether it was truly legal or just never pursued as a crime) conveys the idea to the readers that there is something inherently different about those with Wit that renders their child state as something different. In separating Witted-children and non-witted-children, there is an inherent implication that Wit must be something more mature, to be confined to adult spaces -- an idea

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[90] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p36

[91] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p37

which is also perpetuated under homophobic rhetoric. This rhetoric forms in a few different ways, such as Anita Bryant and the Save Our Children coalition's description of homosexuality as harmful to children under the argument that "homosexuals cannot reproduce, so they must recruit [...] the youth of America."[92] This notion of 'recruitment', which as been described by sociologist and psychologists as an anti-gay myth[93], perpetuates the harmful and inaccurate[94] conflation of homosexuality with paedophilia and child abuse.[95] This kind of rhetoric, as demonstrated within the quote, is used as a justification for persecution -- a sentiment of they are wrong, they are 'other' so it is our duty to cull them from society.

This recruitment myth also comes with the sentiment that one must 'protect' their kids from homosexuality, or run the risk of 'losing their children' to it; in other words, as well as accusing homosexual adults of paedophilia, there is also the 'fear' that someone's child may come out as gay and be lost to the parents, as though the child's sexuality renders them no longer the parents child. This notion can be seen in rhetoric such as Margaret Thatcher's comment during her 1987 speech at the Conservative Party conference that "Children who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have an

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[92] Jillian Eugenios, *How 1970s Christian Crusader Anita Bryant helped spawn Florida's LGBTQ culture war,* NBC news https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/1970s-christian-crusader-anita-bryant-helped-spawn-flor idas-lgbtq-cult-rcna24215 (April 13 2022) (accessed 29/11/12023)

[93] Richard Peddicord, *Gay and lesbian rights: a question: sexual ethics or social justice?* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward: 1996) p. 73.

[94] Lamb Expect Affidavit in Gill Final https://web.archive.org/web/20161121221049/http://www.glad.org/uploads/docs/cases/gill-v-office-of -personnel-management/2009-11-17-doma-aff-lamb.pdf [accessed 30/111/2023]

[95] Fred Fejes, *Gay rights and moral panic: the origins of America's debate on homosexuality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan:2008) p. 137.

inalienable right to be gay"[96], a notion that existed as a fundamental building block to the

enactment of the UK's Section 28 act, which prohibited the 'promotion of homosexuality' by

local authorities. There was, and still is, a fundamental belief amongst certain anti-gay circles

that any forms of queerness are an inherently mature topic. This is in direct opposition to the

way in which heterosexuality and hetero-relationships are treated by the wider society as a

simple, essentially neutral identity and part of life. This supposed maturity of the topic is then

taken as proof that queerness is something which must be both hidden from children, and that

children cannot be. During the debates involved in the passing of the law, Lord Somers

commented that "When one is young at school, one is very impressionable and may just as

easily pick up bad habits as good habits"[97] -- this comment frames homosexuality as a form

of temptation for the 'impressionable' and young. This same framing can be seen when

Burrich moves from blaming Fitz to blaming the animals during their original confrontation

about the Wit. The quote also reflects the notion that queerness is something that has no place

in or around children. While Section 28 is a UK specific law, it is reflective of wider concerns

around queerness and otherness that were prevalent across Western culture at the time, as

shown by the work by the Save Our Children coalition. This overarching idea about otherness

as inherently mature and unsuitable for children has had a clear impact upon Hobb's

exploration of otherness, as seen within Burrich's comments. Those with Wit were not

viewed as "truly children"[98] because of this notion that queerness (and otherness as a whole)

are not topics for children. This cultural belief serves as both a reflection of real world belief

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[96] Margaret Thatcher, *Speech to Conservative Party Conference 1987*
https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106941 [accessed 30/11/2023)

[97] Lord Somers, House of Lords Debate of February 1, 1988
https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1988/feb/01/local-government-bill [accessed 30/11/2023]

[98] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p37

and well as an in-universe justification for the character of the world to hunt and punish those who are different, even when they are children.

Burrich, as the reader's first vessel for societal ideas of condemnation around Wit, is a character fundamentally locked in his shame, and inside what Peter Melville coined his "Wit-Closet".[99] It is from this position that he attempts to impose this sense of shame upon Fitz, in a manner undeniably reminiscent of those whose internalised homophobia causes them to lash out upon other queer people. According to Butler in their essay, *Imitation and Gender Insubordination,* regulatory ideas such as heterosexuality require constant and repetitive reiterations in an "incessant and panicked" manner, in order to install and maintain their place in normative discourse. These reiterations suggest that the normative is something "perpetually at risk" of "becoming undone" and as such, anything that challenges them must also be repetitively renounced and denied any standing.[100] Burrich's relationship to his 'curse' (a relation defined by Burrich's repetitive distancing from, and denial of, his own abilities) as well as his attempts to instil this same behaviour in Fitz to continue this cycle of renouncement, can therefore be thought of in a terms of 'queer panic' trigger by this instability and his unwillingness to destabilise this societal norms any further. The term 'queer panic' refers to the idea of trying to distance oneself from anything perceived as queer behaviour, often out of a sense of shame or a desire to protect oneself from potential outside ramifications. It is most typically associated masculinity, especially hypermasculinity as explored by Joel Penney[101], due to the perception of queerness as inherently 'feminine' and

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[99] Melville, Queerness and Homophobia in Robin Hobb's Farseer Trilogies, p284

[100] Judith Butler, Imitation and Gender Insubordination in *The Lesbain and Gay Studies Reader*, ed Abelove, Barale and Halperin (London, Routledge: 1993)

[101] Joel Penney, '"We don't wear tight clothes": Gay Panic and Queer Style in Contemporary Hip Hop in *Popular Music and Society*, Vol 35, Issue 3 (2012) pp 321-332

the subsequent implication of that under a patriarchal society. As noted in Matthew Oliver's

History in the Margins: Epigraphs and Negative Space in Robin Hobb's Assassin's

Apprentice[102], Burrich as a character actively chooses and asserts his identity as

hypermasculine, repeatedly using gendered language and shaming in order to assert control

of Fitz' use of his magic -- a type of magic rooted around emotional bonds, which is typically

coded by society as feminine jurisdiction. Burrich's insistence on being a 'man' rather than a

beast, as the panicked renunciation of the queerness of his heart—all those "things" that he

keeps "buried even from [him]self"[103] -- therefore serves to reinforce and maintain his place

within society as well as to keep society in place. That Fitz operates, within Burrichs

narrative, as a potential cataclysmic force that could reveal his true nature and destabilise

everything (after all, if the stable boy is found to possess the Wit, why would the not also

look at the Stablemaster who taught him to care for the animals) is also completely

understandable, as just the existence of Fitz destabilised everything in both Burrich's life as

well as for the wider world of the Six Duchies. The narrator version of Fitz inevitably ends up

focusing on the big-picture repercussions of his existence: as a narrator, Fitz's perspective is

that of a historian getting distracted by their own role in the history. His birth sets many

things into motion, especially regarding the royal line of ascension, and so he deviates with

attempts to understand and explain his perspective once he realises how embroiled in all of it

he was. He wonders about his role in it all, as anyone faced with this realisation would:

> "But time? Did the times I was born into await my birth to be? Did the
>
> events rumble into place [...] meshing with my conception and pushing my life

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[102] Matthew Oliver, 'History in the Margins: Epigraph and Negative Space in Robin Hobb's *Assassin's Apprentice,* in Mythlore, Vol 41, No 1 (October 2022) p 58

[103] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p237

along? I make no claim to greatness. And yet, had I not been born, had not my parents fallen before a surge of lust, so much would be different."[104]

However, with all of this focus upon the intertwined nature of events, Fitz overlooks the smaller scale ramifications. When Fitz is brought to the attention of the royal family by his maternal grandfather, his reveal fundamentally shakes up Burrich's life - gone is the once Crowned Prince Chivalry, Burrich's close friend and master, gone is Burrich's role in the place, and instead he is now the stablemaster left to care for the bastard child whose existence stripped those very things from him. It is Fitz's coming to the castle, far more than it is Burrich's injury, that prevents him from living the life he once had had at Chivalry's side. This becomes even more significant to Burrich with the understanding of how strong the bond between the two men was. As this chapter has already explored, it is revealed that Chivalry made sure that Burrich received training in weaponry, literacy, honesty and other supposed "man's values"[105] and for this, Burrich gave his absolute loyalty to the prince. In the stablemaster's own words, "the dog had a master again"[106], and Chivalry taught him how to live a life rather than just make a living. The framing of "the dog had a master again" as a descriptor of their relationship is particularly interesting, given the intensity of their bond (which is made clear at multiple points, with Burrich often reiterating to Fitz that he is caring for him *for* Chivalry's sake) as well as the queer undertones of the Wit power. Whether or not the dynamic between Burrich and Chivalry is itself queer is a source of some debate amongst fans[107], but arguably it is enough, for this scenario, that the bond between the two men went

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[104] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p154

[105] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest,* p21

[106] Ibid.

[107] @lotrspectialist on r/robinhobb, 'Just finished the Farseer Trilogy for the first time --- thoughts and questions about Burrich, the Fool and Queerbaiting' (2019)

beyond that which was typical for the male relationships shown within the series, and even beyond what they themselves may know (Burrich, for example, is unaware that Chivalry had sealed his mind from anyone else using the Skill upon him, thereby rendering Burrichs mind accessible to only Burrich and himself).

Following on from this notion of Fitz as a disruptive force, we can move to the final way in which this chapter will explore the idea of the magical binary system and the ways in which it operates as a form of substitution and allegory. Namely, the disruption of the magical system as a binary force. As was mentioned at the start of this chapter, Fitz is in a unique position where he is capable of wielding both Wit and Skill, in direct contrast to the binary presentation of the system. While never stated explicitly, there a multiple pieces of narration and dialogue throughout the Farseer Trilogy which frame the two powers as existing in opposition: One is taught, the other instinctive; One belongs to the upper classes, the other can be found in the most rural of villages; One is celebrated and coveted, the other is demonised. And yet, from the very start of *Assassin's Apprentice,* it is made clear to the reader that this division between the two does not apply to Fitz. On page 19, Narrator-Fitz details the efforts the Ruling family had put into the cultivation and preservation of Skill within the Royal and Noble bloodlines:

> "They had, for several generations, kept up their ties with Outislanders, making courting voyages and returning home with plump, dark brides of their own folk. And so, the blood of the Outislanders still ran strong [...] producing

https://www.reddit.com/r/robinhobb/comments/gzjnwj/just_finished_the_farseer_trilogy_for_the_first
/ [accessed 30/11/2023]

children with black hair and dark eyes [...] [and a] predilection for the Skill

[...] I had my share of that heritage too."[108]

Not only does this quote link the Skill to practices of enforced and controlled heteronormative behaviours for the specific continuation of their power, thereby linking Skill and heteronormativity in a similar manner to the linking of Wit and queerness through condemnation, it also serves to immediately alert the audience to Fitz's powerful potential. This tried and tested method of continuing the Outislander's bloodline to continue the possess of Skill is something the reader can automatically assume is successful (otherwise why have the Noble families continued with such a tradition that requires such effort). As such, it follows that Fitz's implication that he too has Skill can be trusted -- as he reminds the audience, "[He] had [his] share of that heritage too."

At this point in the book, the reader has only encountered passive instances of Wit, and could easily and understandably assume that these instances are Wit. Even with the first couple of active displays of power, we haven't yet had any clarification around what Skill looks like, or a reference to the Wit. It is Burrich's comments that first alert the reader to the idea that there is more power in this world than just the magic of the upper classes. From this point, where Wit is established as "power of the beast"[109], much of the previous displays of passive power are recontextualised to the audience and revealed to be exertions of Wit. With this reveal, the reader is left to question Narrator-Fitz's implied confidence in his own possession of Skill -- after all, the narrator is a far older version of the protagonist, and so

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[108] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p19

[109] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p37

must know that these instances were Wit, not Skill. This confusion is further emphasised on page 47, in which Fitz experiences someone using Skill on him for the first time when meeting his grandfather, King Shrewd: "When he turned away, a chill went over me, as if I had suddenly shed a coat. It was my first experience of the Skill at the hands of a master."[110] In this quote, with its references to sensory consequences and/or manipulation, the reader immediately understands the Skill as a power rooted around the mind, contrasted to the Wit which is about emotions and bonds. The subtlety of the Skill is also highlighted in the quote and seems to further juxtapose the two abilities, given the intensity with which the Wit has so far been described. These contrasts between the two abilities set up a sense of binary existence between the two, and yet, within this same scene where Fitz first experience Skill, there is another reference to his ability to use Skill, as King Shrewd notes to Prince Regal that there is a "potential Skill"[111] in Fitz. Later in the book, this potential is further confirmed as Fitz is informed that he "must be taught the Skill."[112] This is an interesting point as it seems to confirm the sense of opposition that underlines the framing of the two powers (Skill must be taught, as Chade informs Fitz with his comment that "Not many are taught the Skill, anymore [...] Keep the Skill more secret, more of an elite tool"[113], while we have multiple demonstrations that show Wit as an instinctive, intuitive ability); and yet, at the same time, in confirming Fitz can wield Skill, this sense of binary opposition is also fundamentally shaken -- if the two abilities were as diametrically opposed as the binary framing implies, how is it that Fitz is capable of wielding both?

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[110] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p47

[111] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p46

[112] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p147

[113] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p152

It is worth noting briefly that there is, of course, another binary which is arguably reinforced by the assertion that the Wit and Skill are two sides of the same thing – that is, the binary of magic vs non-magic. However, this is not the focus of this paper for a couple of reasons. The first of which is that the texts themselves spend little time with characters of no magical ability, especially in the original trilogy which remains our main focus. Fitz, Burrich, The Fool and Verity are, understandably, the most focused upon characters for much of the early stories, all of whom are magical in one aspect or another. The few non-magical characters who are prevalent for more than just one-off mentions, such as Chade and Molly, are distinctly othered in different aspects; Molly as a working class girl, in contrast to Fitz's life in the castle, and Chade, as the bastard brother of the King, hidden away, who may himself be capable of Skilling but who has been denied the opportunity to learn to wield it. Secondly, while there is much bias and prejudice throughout the series regarding those with the Wit ability, there is no mention of such a cultural belief system between the Skilled and those without. As such, given that Skill is praised as a royal ability, and having no magic is seen as a neutral, common state, whereas the Wit is looked down upon as a cultural taboo, the societal binary within the Kingdom of the Six Duchies falls most accurately as Skill (and non-magic) vs Wit.

Since this original framing as posed by the Six Duchies cultural understanding can be found to have such a flaw at its core, there is a fundamental question about what this means for the binary presented. If we take away the opposition element and consider the two forms as they are stated to be, we see the most important detail that gets buried under all of the differences. -- at the end, both Wit and Skill are forms of the same thing, magic. When looking at Skill and Wit as two versions of one thing, a striking similarity appears between

the two, highlighting the one detail that definitively connects the ways in which the different forms of magic are enacted. As has already been explored, Wit, at its most base level, is a power defined by connections between different life forces -- be it the Wit-bonds that form between a Wit-wielder and their animal companion, or the life force sense ability that allows Fitz to identify The Forged Ones as something unnatural. Skill is similarly dependent on the idea of connections, as it is a telepathic power and therefore rooted in the idea of linking two minds to one another, where one mind has the ability to affect the other through this connection. While connections can take many forms, one of the most prevalent in society's understanding is the idea of love; romantic, platonic or familial, it is the connection that every person knows and searches for in one form or another. It is also a connection type that has been interpreted as a binary system by some, but truly exists as a one thing that can take different forms of expression.

As the book '*Queer Excursions: Retheorizing Binaries in Language, Gender and Sexualities*' explains, 'Research on language, gender and sexuality has been uneasily walking the [...] binary since the fields beginning in the 1970s'[114] and while this line of thought does hold its benefits for understanding sociopolitical dynamics and processes around topics such as gender inequalities, it does not accurately encapture the broad spectrum that forms the ideas of gender and sexuality. Laura Erickson-Schroth and Jennifer Mitchell explore one of the consequences of this framing in their paper, '*Queering Queer Theory, or Why Bisexuality Matters*' which states that 'Bisexuality is an often invisible identity. [...] [This invisibility] of bisexuality [within scholarship] reveals that queer theory has not yet moved beyond its

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[114] Editors Preface In *Queer Excursions: Retheorizing Binaries in Language, Gender and Sexualtiy* ed. Lal Zimman, Jenny L Davis and Joshua Raclaw (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2014) p ix

position [of homosexuality as an] opponent to heterosexuality'[115] As they explain in this article, bisexual people often face opposition from both the heterosexual and homosexual communities, being told that they are too straight for the queer side and too gay for the heterosexual community -- even when repressing the queerness. This idea of too much and needing to pick a side is paralleled in other biphobic rhetoric such as the stereotype that bisexual people are promiscuous or greedy.

During Fitz's tale, his ability in Skill is forcefully damaged and ripped away from him by Galen, the Royal SkillMaster who makes it abundantly clear that he never wanted to teach Fitz -- never wanted to bring him into the Skill community. At the same time, Fitz is being constantly told he must hide and suppress his Wit, a message which is heightened by the threat of Galen finding out about Fitz's Wit and the potentially deadly consequences of such a reveal. While Galen is fortunately unaware of Fitz's ability with Wit, this immediate rejection of Fitz from the Skill, forms an interesting parallel to the rejection of bisexuality from heterosexual spaces, considering how Skill can be read as the socially acceptable form of magic which is continued through heteronormative practices. This is further enforced as it is due to a constraint enforced upon Galen by Skill-use that causes Galen to reject the young boy -- Chivalry had placed a Skill-command of loyalty upon Galen, trapping Galen into a state of absolute loyalty for Chivalry, rendering the SkillMaster incapable of thoughts against the Prince, even following Chivalry's death. Because of this mind control and the tension it forms against Galen's own political beliefs and loyalties (he is a character firmly loyal to his

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[115] Laura Erickson-Schroth and Jennifer Mitchell, *Queering Queer Theory, or Why Bisexuality Matters* Journal of Bisexuality, Vol 9, p297
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/15299710903316596?needAccess=true&role=button
[accessed 08/12/2023]

mother, Queen Desire and his half-brother, Prince Regal), Galen lashes out, directing his frustrations with Chivalry upon Fitz, Chivalry's illegitimate son.

Similarly, the reading of Wit as an allegory for queerness, or more specifically, homosexuality, can also be read as mirroring the messaging directed at the bisexual community. Burrich, as Wit-only wielder, is therefore operating as the substitution for the homosexual community -- with this interpretation in mind, his insistence that Fitz should and must hide his Wit (his queerness) therefore can be seen as reimagining the idea of 'straight-passing'. The idea of passing is derived from the notion proposed by Butler that gender is an act of performativity -- Butler emphasises the idea that the body is a complex canvas and while it is not possible to derive the kind of sexuality someone practices from their appearance, the performativity of appearance and gesture can, and are by society, read as giving insight into the internal core of a person.[116] As such, the notion of 'passing' can be understood as operating in such a way that, either by intention or not, one is no longer 'recognised as a member of a group to which the person in question belongs.'[117] While historically associated in regards to race or ethnicity, the term passing has also been used in relation to sexuality and gender, either due to an intentional effort to keep their orientation private, or those who do not match up to societal expectations of queerness rooted in stereotypes. As noted by Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell, 'Bisexuals in relationships often blend into the sexual orientation dictated by that relationship, rather than retaining their status as bisexuals. People who identify as bisexual are regularly accused of denying their true

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[116] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990)

[117] Leanne Dawson, *Playing Femme and Not Playing it Straight: Passing, Performance and Queering Tim and Place,* 'feral feminism: Queer Feminine Affinites, Issue 7' (2018) p87 https://feralfeminisms.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/12-Leanne-Dawson.pdf (accessed 08/12/2023)

heterosexuality or homosexuality and either "having fun" trying out bisexuality if they are straight, or attempting to avoid homophobia, and access heterosexual privilege, if they are gay.'[118] As this quote suggests, there has long since been a notion within the more biphobic elements of the queer community that, as bisexuals can 'happily' live a life that, from the outside, registers as heterosexual (for example, a bisexual woman could marry a man and live out the heteronormative traditional family ideal), the bisexual identity is less 'queer' that 'true' homosexuality. Furthermore, certain sections of the queer community, namely those who struggle and feel discomfort with their own queer identity, have pushed the idea that bisexual people *should*, in fact, enact this 'straight-passing privilege' in order to maintain their safety and 'respectability' -- much in the same way that Burrich, who deeply despises and fears his own Wit ability, pushes onto Fitz a need to hide who he is, under the framing that it is for Fitz' safety and reputation.

Throughout this chapter, we have focused on how the magical system represents the sexuality side of queerness, and the ways in which Fitz disrupts the supposed binary of this, in a manner akin to the bisexual experience. We began with an exploration of the magical binary at play within Hobb's work, considering the similarities between how Skill and Wit, and Straight and Gay experiences are discussed. This was done by comparing the tone and language that surrounds the two magics, with specific considerations towards the internalised hatred possessed by Burrich about Wit, and its similarities to internalised homophobia and homophobic rhetoric. We then furthered this comparison by considering what Fitz's disruption to this binary reveals about magic. By wielding two supposedly distinct powers,

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[118] Laura Erickson-Schroth and Jennifer Mitchell, *Queering Queer Theory, or Why Bisexuality Matters* Journal of Bisexuality, Vol 9, p300
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/15299710903316596?needAccess=true&role=button
(accessed 08/12/2023)

Fitz demonstrates the fundamental truth about them -- they are both magic and magic is connections. Connections such as love, in any form.

      Within the next chapter, we shall continue to explore the similarities between queerness and the magic of the Farseer Universe. We shall turn our concerns towards the relationship magic has with gender, building upon some of the points raised in this chapter around the feminisation of magic. We shall move towards considering characters such as The Fool, and the ways in which magic seems to affect various characters' experiences with gender.

CHAPTER TWO: THE FOOL – GENDER AND COHERENCE

Throughout the last chapter, we focused on the ways Fitz, as our protagonist and narrator, serves as a disruptive force within the framework of Skill/Wit, and the ways in which this framework reads as an allegorical representation of the Hetero- /Homo- sexual binary. Following these thoughts of disruption, we now turn to the character known as The Fool. Much like Fitz, The Fool is a character embedded within frameworks that zeir very presence within the story disturbs. While in Fitz's case, these frameworks were explored within the frameworks of class and an allegorical presentation of sexuality, The Fool offers more to explore -- The Fool's presence is a disturbing force to the coherence the society has attempted to build around the idea of gender, sexuality and power; most importantly, however, The Fool unsettles the ways in which these differing societal constructs interact and interfere with one another. As such, it is the goal of this chapter to explore the various ways in which The Fool affects these constructs, as well as the consequences of zeir presence. This will be considered both in terms of the character within the world and in terms of the reader's perception of the character. As such, this chapter will begin by establishing the ways in which the world adheres to the binary, before considering the destabilisation enacted by The Fool's presence.

When it comes to the world of the Six Duchies and its relation to gender, it seems on the surface to be a simple mirror to our world, with our heteronormative and patriarchal structures also apparent within this fantasy land. This can be seen as early on as pages 4 and 5, when Fitz's maternal grandfather hands Fitz over to the house-guard with a quick explanation about how he already had '[Fitz's] mother to keep and feed. For not a man will have her now, not with this pup running at her heels.'[119] In this quote, we can see the

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[119] Robin Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice* (London: HarperCollins, 2014) p4

undercurrent of misogyny that perpetuates both our world and the world of the characters --
as long as Fitz's mother has a visual reminder of her 'indiscretions' trailing after her, no man
'will have her'[120]. Her opportunities within this world are tied to her marital potential and
without marriage, she is unable to leave her parents' house. Fitz's presence then is a distinct
mark on her reputation, a constant sign that her 'value' is to be considered tarnished by her
past behaviours. In order for his mother to have a life outside of her parents' house, she must
be separated from her child. Even her parents considered her tarnished, as shown by the
grandfather's dismissive way of describing her – in stating he already had '[Fitz's] mother to
keep and feed'[121], he describes his own child in a manner similar to describing an unwelcome
pet. There is no sense of love or care, but rather a tone of impatience and a desire to get rid of
her. Getting his now 'tarnished' daughter out of his house is the grandfather's main goal
behind getting rid of Fitz, as both daughter and grandchild are liabilities to the familial
reputation.

In contrast, we get Fitz's grandfather's later comment, revealing Prince Chivalry to be
Fitz's father: 'Him what's King-in-Waiting. That's who got him. So let him do for him, and
be glad he managed to father one child, somewhere.' With these few simple sentences, we
see a marked difference in the way in which the two sexes are treated for having bastard
children. Firstly, these comments highlight the way in which men, unlike women, are
capable of avoiding (even unintentionally) the consequences of their indiscretions (Fitz's
mother has her opportunities limited by the constant, physical reminder that is her son, while
Chivalry has continued with his life unaffected until now). Even with the reveal of Fitz's
presence, the changes within Chivalry's life are shown to be chosen by Fitz's father. Chivalry

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[120] Ibid.

[121] Ibid.

was not forced from his position on the throne, but rather, he chose to leave. Furthermore, it is made clear by many, including Prince Verity (who takes over the role of King-in-Waiting from Chivalry), that his abdication from the role is considered a loss, as shown by Verity's habit of comparing himself to his older brother, and attempting to do as he believes Chivalry would. This comparison between the two brothers is best exemplified within Verity's interactions with Fitz -- he constantly straddles the line of affection and distance, with Fitz noting that the Prince would, if he noticed the young boy, 'tousle [his] hair'[122] and yet at the same time, Verity had 'no time for greetings'.[123] Verity's affectionate moments suggest a desire to be closer with his nephew, while his distance demonstrates a discomfort with becoming too close to Fitz, not wanting to replace another of his brother's roles. Chade also tells Fitz at one point that Chivalry's departure was of his own choosing, stating that the Prince was unlikely to return to Buckkeep or the throne line, as he would not 'go against what he set himself upon.'[124] Furthermore, this quote also presents Fitz as something worth, to some degree, celebrating -- with the line 'be glad he managed to father one child, somewhere'[125] quite a few details become apparent. One; the kingdom has been waiting for their Crown Prince to have an heir and Two; with the use of the word 'somewhere', the reader can infer that the Prince has been trying, and failing, with someone -- his wife. In this, we learn that not only is Fitz a bastard child, he is also, on his father's side, the product of infidelity. And yet, at the most fundamental level, Fitz as a Royal is an idea introduced to the narrative with the words 'be glad he managed to father one child.'[126] This solidifies that idea

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[122] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p43

[123] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p133

[124] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p98

[125] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p4

[126] Ibid.

that, though improper, there is something to be grateful for in Chivalry's infidelity – an idea that directly contrasts the shame brought upon Fitz's unnamed mother for having a child out of wedlock.

Ultimately, when these two quotes are contrasted like so, they serve to highlight the disparity between the two sexes, and the ways in which *The Farseer Trilogy* sets out to mirror societal ideas rooted in the patriarchal heteronormativity that defines our reality. It would seem, upon first glance, that this is the extent to which the novel intends to engage with questions around gender, with multiple quotes throughout the texts referencing this power imbalance between the sexes. Not only is this one of the first things we learn about societal expectations for people, as these reactions are revealed within the very first chapter, we also see these limited chances for women repeated again later in the book. For example, Fitz's comments about Lady Grace's future: 'If she did not learn how to be a duchess before her youth and beauty faded, only years of loneliness and ridicule await her.'[127] This is a particularly poignant example as it is made clear within the scene between Fitz and Lady Grace, that she was a common girl, chosen to marry a lord because of her beauty. As such, she has none of the education or training her position demands -- by one simple choice motivated by shallow reasoning, her Lord husband makes it so her only value as a duchess can be her beauty -- something which is ultimately a fragile resource and that reduces her to an object, like art, to be appreciated, but having limited practical use for ruling. He showers her in jewels and finery in an attempt to further heighten her beauty in order to boost his own image (the older duke with his beautiful wife), regardless of how negatively this impacts her image (the young, idiotic duchess wearing jewels in troubled times). He leaves her without any of the training or help she needs; as such, once her beauty fades with age, she will still be

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[127] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p146

uncertain and fumbling without the goodwill some grant her because of her appearance.

Worse still, is the knowledge that Lady Grace is aware of her shortcomings as a Duchess, and

powerless to change them, as she has no-one to turn to, nor any idea of how to fix them. She

is a woman who, despite holding a powerful title, has little power over her life, having been

plucked from the world she knows on a shallow whim -- it is not until Fitz interferes that she

is granted any potential control as he hands her the answer to solve the current issue.

However, it is never made clear how Lady Grace does as a duchess following this interaction,

and we can only hope that her husband may finally see that she has more to offer than just her

looks.

While this imbalance between the sexes is an important component of our society to

have represented within literature, this is not, in fact, where Hobb stops with the ideas of sex

and gender. As Lenise Prater explains, throughout the tale there is a repeated and perpetual

'disturb[ing of the story's own established] boundaries of [the] hetero-masculine subject,

dislocating vulnerability from the female body and insisting instead that this is shared by all

living beings.'[128] Prater focuses on this through Fitz's engagement with magic, specifically

the feminisation of the Wit and those who possess it, in contrast to those without (either by

virtue of possessing the Skill, or simply by being without magic). While this is a great point,

it is somewhat underexplored within the chapter, as is her other point of attention, the

genderless character known as The Fool. As the first chapter focused on exploring this

dynamic between femininity and Wit, in this chapter we shall tackle the questions around The

Fool, expanding on the start made within Prater's chapter. We shall also delve into features

that were given little to no focus by Prater, such as Fitz's potential development of

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[128] Lenise Prater 'Queering Magic: Robin Hobb and Fantasy Literature's Radical Potential' in *Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Popular Fantasy: Beyond Boy Wizards and Kick-ass Chicks* ed. by Jude Roberts and Esther MacCallum-Stewart (New York: Routledge, 2016) p22

transphobic and/or homophobic attitudes that occur alongside his descent into internalised homophobia.

The character of The Fool is first referenced on page 140, at the start of Chapter Nine of *Assassin's Apprentice*, as a mysterious figure who is mostly unknown to the people of Buckkeep. Chapter Nine begins, as all chapters do, with an italicised excerpt from the history book that Fitz is meant to be writing and it is here that we are given a few key, defining facts about The Fool: The Fool arrived in Buckkeep in the seventeenth year of King Shrewd's rule (before Fitz, although it is unclear how much earlier); despite speculation, nothing is known of The Fools life prior to Buckkeep, or even why zey came to Buckkeep; and finally, the age, species and, most importantly for our considerations, gender of The Fool are unknown.

The uncertainty around the gender of The Fool is a repeated factor, beyond just *The Farseer Trilogy* and into the wider *Realm of the Eldering's* franchise. Many characters raise questions around The Fool's gender, questions which The Fool is known to be aware of, and refuses to give an answer to, stating that it is no-one's business: "'Rubbish! [...] Mere plumbing, when all is said and done. Why is is it important?'"[129] The use of the term 'plumbing' is particularly important, as it removes the aspects of gender and sexuality from the reference to genitalia -- all that is left is the purely practical reference to urination. This response serves as an indication to the audience that, rather than simply an accidental result of zeir appearance, the character instead chooses to actively associate zeirself with a sense of being genderless. Zeir language choices for zeir body strip away the elements being pried at in order to create this genderless identity. Even the character's name can be considered reflective of this created uncertainty.

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[129] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest*, p572

Early on it is established that the kingdom of the Six Duchies has a cultural belief in the power of names: "Folk beliefs claim that such names ['Taker', 'Shrewd', 'Patience' for example] were sealed to the newborn babes by magic, and that these royal offspring were incapable of betraying the virtues whose names they bore."[130] We can see that this is a continued tradition, as reflected by the names of the various Royal figures we meet, such as Prince Chivalry and Lady Grace. While it is a tradition predominantly confined to Royal spheres, it is not inherently limited to these spheres. For example, in the case of Fitz, his naming acts as an interesting continuation and distortion of the tradition. He is not given a name until some time has passed -- the rest of the Castle, including Burrich, instead take to referring to him as 'boy' or 'fitz' (when uncapitalised, 'fitz' is used as a more civil way to call him 'bastard'). Only when Burrich needs a name to tell Fitz off with, does Fitz receive his name -- FitzChivalry Farseer, a name which translates to the 'Bastard of Chivalry Farseer.' This name actively serves to confine Fitz to his father's legacy, rendering the child as only a lesser extension of his father, which is one of the predominant lessons Burrich attempts to instil in Fitz during the scene. With this distortion of the practice in mind, what the name 'The Fool' tells us about the character is therefore particularly interesting as zey are another figure of disruption.

'The Fool' is first and foremost the title of the character, indicative of zeir role as the King's Jester. As such, when Fitz and the reader first meet The Fool, zeir behaviours -- and even zeir appearance -- fall in line with the expectations of this role. Zey act as a mysteriously cheeky figure, whose acrobatic and song-like manner of speaking provide an 'acceptable' way for zem to publicly embarrass people who try to speak to zem, regardless of their higher social status. When considering the function of a 'Fool' and how that links into

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[130] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice* p1

the character, there is a recurring theme of disruption -- an "anarchic assault on the status quo."[131] On a fundamental level, the image of 'a Fool' is tied to the trickster archetype which has been described as the "mythological form of the fool."[132]

With this in mind, it becomes important to understand the role the trickster has played within various cultures as a continually repeating, multicultural archetype. According to Lewis Hyde, the "trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox."[133] Hyde's description built on the work of previous studies into the Trickster archetype that understood the trickster as "both subhuman and superhuman, bestial and divine beings."[134] These explanations both share an underlying message of disruption and challenge to the typical order which, as this chapter explores, The Fool represents. In particular, there's a lot of discussion around the way the trickster archetype interacts with gender. Traditionally, tricksters have been presented as masculine, such as Hermes from Ancient Greek Mythology and the Monkey King from *Journey to the West*. However, they have also long been linked with gender fluidity and transformation, most famously in the case of the Norse Trickster God, Loki. Loki, in Norse mythology, was a cunning shapeshifter capable of changing his appearance/sex[135] who has frequently been interpreted within recent years as a genderfluid figure due to his comfort in

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[131] Helen Lock, *Transformations of the Trickster,* https://southerncrossreview.org/18/trickster.htm [accessed 11/06/2023]

[132] William Willeford, *The Fool and His Sceptre: A Study in Clowns and Their Audience* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern UP, 1969)

[133] Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998)

[134] Carl Jung, '*Appendix*' in Paul Radin's *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1956)

[135] "Loki" *Encyclopedia Britannica*, The Editors of Encyclopaedia, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Loki [accessed 6/12/2023]

transition between masculinised and feminised forms.[136] In this, we can see a connection to the character of The Fool, who likewise is comfortable shifting between differently gendered presentations as and when it suits zem. Similarly, details such as calling the trickster "subhuman and superhuman" and "mythical" are particularly interesting, given The Fool's identity as a White, as opposed to a human, as well as zeir prophetic abilities. These descriptions also mark the trickster archetype as one with inherent contradiction at its core --one cannot be simultaneously both sub and super of the same thing. This notion both hints towards the disruption The Fool represents within binary notions as well tying in nicely to the fluidity zey are characterised by.

Even zeir appearance distinguishes zem from the rest of Buckkeeps populations -- Zey stands out from the other members of the Castle, with zeir all white body and hair, and colourless eyes, coupled with the bright and flamboyant clothing zey dresses in. While this conjures interesting ideas around the notion of 'blank canvases' and presentation and performativity, it is the responses from the rest of Buckkeep which are particularly worth remembering. Notably, most people within the Castle find zem to be a unsettling figure due to his appearance and the lack of information about him, which makes the friendship that forms between Fitz and Fool even more important to the pair as they both understand what it is like to not be accepted by those around them -- this notion will be explored in more depth in the next chapter.

However, the role of the King's jester is not the only one that the character embodies. Throughout the majority of the *Realm of the Eldering's* series, there are repeated occurrences of The Fool "shifting" into different appearances, who carry differing names and slight

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[136] For a recent example, we can look at the MARVEL comics, specifically examples such as 2007s *Thor #5*. More information can be found in the following article: https://www.cbr.com/loki-genderfluid-comics-debut/ [accessed 6/12/2023]

changes in personality. These include Lord Golden, (a persona[137] who takes great delight in engaging with beauty, either through collection of finery, or flirting) and Amber (a female bead-maker who shows a similar love for fine jewellery and clothing). The existence of certain shared traits across the various persona's implies that these shared traits are components of the true personality of The Fool -- for example, the love of finery can be seen across all the persona's and similarly, the tendency towards sarcastic commentary not only exists in these personas but also in private. When Fitz is explaining his early friendship with The Fool to Chade, Fitz says that The Fool "mocks me, but from him, it seems a kindness. He makes me feel, well, important. That he could choose me to talk to."[138][139] The importance of the dynamic between these two shall be explored more later on, but for now what is more important within this quote is its confirmation that, at the very least, the sarcastic attitude of The Fool exists outside of a persona for the Castle's population. We can understand these one-on-one moments as a type of private moment, as it is made clear by Chade that The Fool does not normally seek out speaking to people, making zeir repeated efforts to talk with Fitz an outlier to the behaviours of the persona. As such, we know that Fitz has been, at least to some degree, granted the opportunity to see beyond the personas. In establishing that there is a true self, the private self, who The Fool chooses to hide, we know two key facts:

1) The Fool is a character ultimately defined by the notion of performance, as shown by his over-the-top mannerism and variety of persona's

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[137] The word persona shall be used to make a distinction between The Fool, and Amber/Lord Golden. This has been done for clarity's sake as The Fool is how we first, and predominantly, know the character within the series and shall be the main way zey are referred to.

[138] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p195

[139] Quotations have been left with the original use of pronouns, in order to demonstrate how other's view the character within the universe.

2) These performance's render The Fool as a closeted character, whose true self can only be seen within private moments, such as those between Fitz and The Fool.

With these facts in mind, we can then turn towards theory, specifically Judith Butler's theory on gender performance. According to Butler, gender is something to be acted out -- it is 'inscribed in daily practices of speech, both expressed and formed through dress, manner and behaviour.'[140] As they explain, 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its result.'[141] Behaviours and supposed expressions, such as an appreciation for jewellery (typically associated with femininity by western society) and even expressions such as one's appearance, are retroactively assigned gender by society, rather than being innately possessed by one gender or another. As such, gender presentation as enacted by an explicitly gender-less being serves as a direct enactment of this premise -- there is no gender identity to be behind any expression, so any reading of gender based on those behaviours must come from society itself.

Something seen throughout the series, however, is the way in which many do insist that The Fool is a gendered being. Not only do most characters refer to The Fool with the use of typically masculine pronouns (he/him), but many, including Fitz, view zem as a male, despite their own expressed confusion about The Fool. This is not universally true though, as in *Assassin's Quest*, Fitz meets a character called Starling Birdsong who firmly believes The

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[140] Samuel A. Chambers, *Judith Butler and Political Theory: troubling politics* (London, Routledge: 2008), p3

[141] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* p25

Fool is a female ('"The Fool is a woman. And she …"'[142]). Though she does adopt the traditionally masculine pronouns in reference to The Fool later on, this is predominately in response to how others refer to The Fool. Furthermore, her references to The Fool are often in the form of her 'frequent diatribes against'[143] zem, which include such points as 'It's not his colour, it's his manner.'[144]

This specific reference to zeir appearance versus zeir behaviour is particularly interesting as it ties into the ways in which the character disrupts the presentation of genders. Starling's complaint about The Fool's behaviour is directly addressing the way the Jester figure interacts with children. This both parallels certain homophobic rhetoric's explored in the last chapter, as well as ties into the expectations traditionally assigned to men and women and their interactions with children. According to traditional patriarchal standards, women are expected to be the primary caregivers, tending to the child's needs. As such, it is common for the mother figure to be delegated the position often referred to as 'being the bad guy' -- in other words, the one who enforces things such as manners, discipline and the like, with the father figure often only stepping in with the final say, as the 'head of the household'. In contrast, men, who are expected to be the primary breadwinners of the household, are subsequently granted a more light-hearted position within the familial dynamic. It is not uncommon for this to manifest through playful teasing, especially considering western societies cultural attitudes such as 'boys will be boys' and 'lad culture', both of which encourage the idea of 'light-hearted bullying/teasing' amongst friends. As such, it is interesting that Starling complains that The Fool 'teases and mocks [the children]'[145] as this

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[142] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest,* p551

[143] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest,* p462

[144] Ibid.

[145] Ibid.

behaviour is more in line with the masculinised expectation of interaction. In complaining about The Fool's 'manner,' Starling's comments reflect the disruption to gendered behaviour expectations that The Fool represents. Because she perceives The Fool as more feminine than many of the other characters do, she is the only one who actively complains about the teasing behaviour The Fool exhibits. In contrast, the same teasing is mentioned in the *Assassin's Apprentice* by Fitz, who perceives The Fool as masculine and therefore the teasing as a more positive trait, with the line 'He mocks me, but from him, it seems a kindness.'[146] In this quote, we can understand the teasing as more in line with so-called friendly 'banter', befitting with the cultural ideas promoted within the western society Hobb was writing in.

These attempts to assign a gender to the character of The Fool become further muddled in the second trilogy, *The Liveship Traders*. In this series, the reader is introduced to the character of Amber, who isn't revealed to be The Fool until the end of the trilogy. Amber is almost exclusively referred to as a woman, with other characters also using the typically feminine pronouns (she/her) when talking about Amber. Then, in the third trilogy, there is the introduction of the persona known as Lord Golden, who is almost always seen, again, as masculine, with the exception of Jek, who considers Lord Golden to be female Amber in disguise.

Throughout these repeated attempts to assign gender to a character who defines themself outside of the idea, we can see two parts of Butler's theory being exemplified. The first idea is the notion put forward by Butler in the 1999 Preface, where they explained how the theory of gender performativity, as they presented it, came to be. Inspired by Jacques Derrida's reading of Kafka's *Before the Law*, gender performativity is an enactment of the principle that "the anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by

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[146] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice*, p195

which that authority is attributed and installed."[147] If it is the anticipation of an authority and its rule that gives the authority its power, rather than the actual action or something innate to the authority, then the authority is never as powerful as when we act on its behalf, anticipating and policing ourselves. We as a society create and demand the following of rules around gender performance in anticipation of an 'authority' that we have created and which only wields as much power as we the society allocate to it. The insistence by other characters that The Fool must fall into a gendered category is an attempt to 'make up' for his lack of participation within gender -- the social system and authority of gendered practice is dependent on our anticipation of potential consequences and subsequent compliance. If someone can choose not to engage with such a model of identification, and receive no consequences, the idea of this authority crumbles; as such, people feel a compulsive need to enforce the consequences of disobedience out of a subconscious fear that the model of authority will be revealed as false. This is furthered by another part of Butler's theory, which is the idea that "bodily figures who do not fit into either gender fall outside the human, indeed, constitute the domain of dehumanised and the abject against which the human itself is constituted."[148] In other words, "those bodily figures" who fall outside of gendered categories, if they cannot be confined into them by outside forces, must be rejected from the human collective. This is an idea which becomes literalised in the case of The Fool as it is later revealed that The Fool belongs to a group of beings known as the Whites, a group distinctive of humans. In establishing The Fool as something other than human, the character is arguably stripped of any need to adhere to the gendered expectations of human society. This does not, however, stop other characters from attempting to force their perceptions of

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[147] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* (New York: Routledge, 2007) pxv

[148] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* p151

The Fool to adhere to various gendered standards; demonstrating the notion that 'outside forces' shall attempt to confine 'bodily figures' such as The Fool into gendered categories.

It is important to note, however, that this act of 'dehumanising' The Fool is not a form of punishment or a consequence for his disobedience towards the gendered social structure. Instead, it is his being a White which provides The Fool with his power, as he is identified to be a 'White Prophet.' A White Prophet is a White who possesses prophetic abilities, including prophetic dreams and the ability to see the long-term consequences of decisions when faced with important crossroads of fate. It is even this nature of being a White Prophet which lingers behind the central narrative bond between The Fool and Fitz, as The Fool identifies Fitz as his Catalyst, a person who is believed to be essential in fulfilling the prophecies of the White Prophet. Interestingly, when The Fool is revealed to belong to this other collective, the dynamic between Fitz and The Fool develops a stronger sense of certainty, as the reveal comes alongside the explanation of The Fool's role as the White Prophet and how that informs the dynamic between the two. In providing what can be viewed as a set of rules for the two to interact within (The Fool sees his visions and uses them to instruct Fitz), Fitz is granted a pass from having to ever 'reject [The Fool] from the human collective'.[149] Not only does The Fool not belong to the human collective in the first place, but within the power balance between the two, Fitz (despite his internalisation of much of Burrich's lessons around masculinity and proper behaviour) would not be expected to control his friend. The Fool, as the Prophet, has the power to instruct Fitz, the Catalyst, not the other way around. As such, though Fitz may, at times, feel uncomfortable with The Fool's gender (a topic which we shall explore more later in this chapter) due to Burrich's lessons, because he is freed from the societal expectation of corralling The Fool into gendered propriety, the

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[149] Ibid.

friendship is able to continue -- this is markedly different from other friendships that either of the pair experience, with neither having longtime friendships outside of one another.

To further disturb the perception that his designation as non-human could be a consequence, it is important to also take into account how the White features within The Fool contribute to the confusion. As previously described, when Fitz and the reader first encounter The Fool, zey has the typical features of a White -- pale skin, colourless eyes, white hair. According to Mary Ann Eaverly[150], throughout much historic art, colour has been used as a signifier and differentiator between genders. In art from both the Ancient Greek and Egyptian periods, we can see a repeated and marked difference in the skin tones given to female and male figures, with the female figures typically being painted with lighter skin. While this has been theorised to be attributed as a reflection of the kind of work the different sexes would be doing (men doing manual labour meaning they spend more time out in the sun, while women stayed inside, working in temples or being at home), Eaverly's book sets out to question this notion. Eaverly instead gestures first towards numerous studies[151], that explore the naturally existing tendency within humans for females to have lighter skin than their male counterparts. From here, considering these theories, and the over-exaggerate extent to which the difference is depicted (even in more realistic art styles of the time period), Eaverly explores the idea of a consistent, repeated desire to distinguish between men and women and to do so through a (at the time) building connection between femininity and lightness. This connection can still be seen today, with lighter colours, such as pastels, being associated with femininity. This premise is also still applied to skin colour, and has in fact, been furthered as a notion, as

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[150] Mary Ann Eaverly *'Tan Men/Pale Women Color and Gender in Archaic Greece and Egypt, a Comparative Approach'* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2013)

[151] For a summary, see L. Madrigal and W. Kelly *'Human Skin-Colour Sexual Dimorphism: A Test of the Sexual Selection Hypothesis'* American Journal of Physical Anthropology, pp 470-82

explained by Ronald E. Halls who outlined the idea of dark-skin being perceived as a "psychological metaphor for masculinity."[152] By this reasoning, the darker the skin, the deeper the perceived connection to masculinity and, in the inverse, the lighter the skin, the deeper a connection to femininity. If we therefore take this link between skin tone and gendered perceptions into the world of the Six Duchies and apply it to The Fool, we subsequently understand the pale tone of the character to be reflective of a perceived sense of femininity.

Skin colour is not the only feature outside of the 'sex characteristics' which can affect how masculine or feminine one is perceived. While the reader is given a rather limited description of the facial features of The Fool in the books, if we turn to other mediums, we can get some more information. In 2022, working with Jody Houser and Dark Horse Comics, Robin Hobb began publishing the *Assassin's Apprentice* comic book version, which adapted the first of the *Realm of the Eldering's* books into comic book form.[153] In this artwork, we can see a lot of facial features, typically considered feminine, such as a soft brow ridge, arched brows, a small chin and V-shaped jawline, and a small, curved and slightly upturned nose.[154] These are all emphasised by his white skin, which would easily contrast any shadows from sharp features, and highlight the chiselled nature of his face, were those features to exist. However, as the softer features associated with femininity are also often tied to youth -- and therefore these details could be attributed to the young age of The Fool depicted in this comic -- we can also consider the illustrated versions of the books, which has the most famous

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[152] Robert E. Hall, 'Dark Skin and the Cultural Ideal of Masculinity' p39

[153] Robin Hobb and Jody Houser, art by Ryan Kelly and Anna Steinbauer, *Assassin's Apprentice,* (Dark Horse Comics, 2023) Appendix 1

[154] Yirae Ort, *Masculine vs. Feminine Facial Features* https://www.ortmdsurgery.com/resources/blog/masculine-vs-feminine-facial-features/ [accessed 12/05/2023]

image of The Fool.[155] While this image is also for *Assassin's Apprentice,* and therefore shows

a version of The Fool at the same age as the comic version, zey looks noticeably more grown

up, more like a late teenager, than the comic book version. Despite this ageing, however, not

all of the feminised features have disappeared, with some (namely the soft brow ridge, small

chin, V-shaped jawline and the curved and upturned nose) still present. Interestingly, these

features are not present in the character-study posted alongside the final painting -- instead,

The Fool has a noticeable brow ridge and a wider chin, more identifiably masculine features.

With these differences between the character study and the finished project, it is clear that

there was an active choice by the artist, most likely informed by Hobb herself, to include

these more feminised characteristics. Once again, these are emphasised by the lighter skin,

which, even with the shadows from the environment cast upon his face, gives a distinct

softness to the features as there is little in the way of shadows from the features themselves.

Ultimately, it is clear within these images that there is a sense of feminisation repeatedly

being drawn attention to within to the character design of The Fool, which is emphasised by

the features of the White species, and serves, as characteristics of The Fool, to further disrupt

the societal standards of binary gendering. Both these images reflect the ways the character

has been perceived by the audience. While some scholars may question the usefulness of this

kind of audience influence, the way readers respond and interpret texts can tell us a lot about

the potential underlying themes and messages. According to reader response theory which

argues for the importance of reader interpretations, texts are simply 'object[s] of paper and

ink until some reader response to the marks on the page as verbal symbols.'[156] What this

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[155] @robinhobb (September 9, 2019) https://twitter.com/robinhobb/status/1171097002249031680 [accessed 10/06/2023] APPENDIX 2

[156] L.Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work.* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press 1978)

means is that the text's meaning comes from the reader as opposed to being an inherent component of the text and therefore only unlocked by critics using analytical skills. As such, artistic interpretations such as those discussed here, highlight the ways in which The Fool has been perceived as a genderless being. Furthermore, given that these images directly accompany versions of the stories and therefore naturally influence how these characters are imagined within the stories, to not consider them at all could be argued as discarding a fundamental piece of the story telling. Though referred to as masculine presenting for the most part, artists have chosen to include softer, more feminised features, in order to demonstrate the complexity of the characters relationship with the gender binary and the disruptive manner that he interacts with it.

These physical features and their connection to the White species leads to another component of the Whites which interacts with The Fool and zeir relation to gender performativity. The Fool and others of zeir species are described as regularly going through a flu-like illness that leaves the bed-ridden for days on end, before, at the end of this cycle, their skin sloughs off, revealing a new, darker skin. While this description emphasises the change in skin tone, in the case of The Fool, there may be more at play. At the end of *The Farseer Trilogy,* The Fool slips into one of these flu-like states. The next time zey is seen is *The Liveship Traders Trilogy,* where The Fool is now Amber, the 'female' beadmaker. Amber is described to have tawny skin and hair, and golden eyes. There is no description beyond this, and yet, it is not until, towards the end of this trilogy, where Amber is seen carving Fitz's face into the ship's side, that zey are revealed to be The Fool. Furthermore, as we have already established, no-one question's Amber's gender, exclusively perceiving 'her' as female. With this in mind, there is a question as to The Fools own perception of this new

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body. As a character who explicitly tries to stay outside of gendering, despite others attempts, how does this shift affect a reading of zeir relationship with gendering.

The Fool's experiences with shifting sex/gender and separation from the binary is most comparable to the experiences of Drag Queens. According to Esther Newton:

> At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, "appearance is an illusion." Drag says "my outside appearance is feminine, but my essence 'inside' is masculine." At the same time, it symbolises the opposite inversion, "my appearance 'outside' is masculine, but my essence 'inside' is feminine."[157]

While the notion of an internal 'essence' of gender exists in tension with Butler's arguments around gender as a learned performance, for the Fool this quote sheds interesting light onto zeir experience. Zeir appearance is at once a 'truth' and an illusion – both the options presented in Newton's quote are true, at all times. As the Fool and Lord Galen, zeir appearance is interpreted as masculine, and yet traits and preferences that are typically considered feminine (such as a love for jewellery and aesthetics) are still defining characteristics; the inverse can be seen within Amber, who has a feminised appearance and yet, as is the case with much of *The Liveship Traders Trilogy* leads, zey are considered a female character operating in a central role within a genre dominated by male protagonist -- in other words, a male role. Furthermore, the character's ability and willingness to quickly shift between the persona's reiterates this idea that both the 'masculine' and 'feminine' are always present and ready to surface. Through this, there is a distinct sense of Butler's notion of discontinuity -- that is, the understanding that, "if gender is the cultural meanings that the

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[157] Esther Newton, Chp 'Role Models' Mother *Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972) p 103

sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way [...] the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed videos and culturally constructed genders."[158] Though the physical changes initiate a shift in how other character's understand zeir gender and the cultural assumptions that accompany that, The Fool continues the same regardless of form. This is because zeir do not seem to consider zeir gender of any importance when it comes to defining who zey are. If zeir sexual characteristics are "mere plumbing" and zeir gender is something zey actively seek to create confusion and obscurity around, zey are implicitly presented as gender neutral. There is no link to be found between zeir gender and sex, as no matter the from, there is always a disconnect and a sense of discontinuity.

With this in mind, we can see that The Fool, just as a drag itself does, "implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself."[159] There is nothing within either the character nor the behaviours themselves that are inherently feminine, but rather they are retroactively considered and assigned feminine by society -- These are the cultural meanings from which gender is constructed. As such, the gender binary and structure by which society operates imitates itself in order to maintain its illusion. This illusion is revealed when those like The Fool engage in that similarly imitative behaviour, imitating their perceived opposite, and highlighting the illusion of it all. The use of the word 'imitative' here is not intended to minimise or contradict the character's experiences as a feminine presenting being (as Amber) but rather to draw attention to the parallel between the authority of gender and the actions of drag. Furthermore, while considering drag does provide a particular insight into the gendered

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[158] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p10

[159] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* p175

experience of The Fool, it is important to clarify that Amber is not simply an instance of drag performance, but rather an example of "the indeterminacy of the gender of the Fool's body"[160] and the ways in which this destabilises gendered distinctions. During the events of *The Tawny Man* trilogy, while The Fool becomes Amber, the protagonist, Althea adopts the disguise of a boy in order to work on a ship. As Prater describes it,

> Gender becomes more fluid and different positions can be occupied depending on which gender is more appropriate to the circumstance. The vulnerability and invulnerability attached to female and male bodies become performances in this construction.[161]

The Fool's transitions between forms and genders occurs regardless of circumstance or appropriateness -- in fact, it directly contradicts what is appropriate by directly defying and therefore destabilising the binary. If one person does not abide by the very nature of their being, it becomes easier for other to willingly, and under the own choice, also defy these rules. As well as disrupting the wider societal concepts of gender, the genderfluid nature of the character inevitably disturbs Fitz's sense of identity, specifically around sexuality. During *Assassin's Quest*, Starling tells Fitz "'The Fool is a woman. And she is in love with you.'"[162] Rather than responding, Fitz turns away as Starling remarks that he is blushing and that he knows Starling's telling the truth. Though rooted in heteronormative assumptions, Starling's

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[160] Lenise Prater 'Queering Magic: Robin Hobb and Fantasy Literature's Radical Potential' in *Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Popular Fantasy: Beyond Boy Wizards and Kick-ass Chicks* ed. by Jude Roberts and Esther MacCallum-Stewart (New York: Routledge, 2016) p28

[161] Ibid.

[162] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest*, p551

words are not entirely wrong -- The Fool does love Fitz, a love that is described as having "no limits"[163] and which everyone around the pair is able to sense. Everyone but Fitz.

Fitz's lack of verbal response and his blushing can be read in two ways -- discomfort at his friends' affections, or reciprocation and indeed, there is evidence within the text to support both interpretations. We will consider these responses some more in the next chapter, but for now, we shall focus solely on the discomfort element. When Fitz learns about The Fool's time as Amber, he expresses a deep sense of discomfort. Ambers voice, with its differences from The Fools voice, makes the 'hair on the back of [Fitz's] neck r[i]se'[164] and Fitz considers it a 'injury'[165] 'to discover that the truest friend [he] ever had was actually a stranger.'[166] As Prater states, Fitz 'feels betrayed and violated by the Fool/Amber's actions, particularly the implication that [The Fool's] identity is not fixed.'[167] In this reaction, we can see the reflexive responsive Fitz has developed from internalising Burrich's teaching about masculinity. When faced with a perceived threat to the stability of his hetero-masculine identity, Fitz's lashes out, repeating the same queer panic Burrich expressed through his demonisation of Wit. This lashing out is framed as an immature and foolish response, as Fitz is describing as pettily '[counting] all [his grievances, numbering them to [himself].'[168] This conveys to the reader that, rather than a natural response, this is the result of the emotional

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[163] Hobb, *The Golden Fool,* p402

[164] Hobb, *The Golden Fool*, p315

[165] Ibid.

[166] Hobb, *The Golden Fool,* p319

[167] Lenise Prater 'Queering Magic: Robin Hobb and Fantasy Literature's Radical Potential' in *Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Popular Fantasy: Beyond Boy Wizards and Kick-ass Chicks* ed. by Jude Roberts and Esther MacCallum-Stewart (New York: Routledge, 2016) p29

[168] Hobb, *The Golden Fool,* p320

repression Fitz has been experiencing more and more as he ages, demonstrating the obstacle of patriarchal hetero-masculine expectations.

Interestingly, Fitz's repulsion at The Fool's shifting of gender operates in direct contrast to his childhood reaction to Chade, his mentor, disguising himself as Lady Thyme. Upon discovering Lady Thyme's true identity as Chade, Fitz has very little reaction, and certainly nothing like the negativity expressed towards The Fool -- instead, his only upset is in feeling 'more foolish that [he] cares to remember.'[169] And when he next interacts with the character of Lady Thyme, his thoughts (even as the elder-Fitz narrator) are focused upon the mannerism of Chade's performance, rather than the gender switching:

> My journey home was spoiled by Chade's resumption of his noisome charade as the vile old lady. I had to fetch and wait upon her, right up to the time that her Buckkeep servants appeared to escort her back up to her chambers. 'She' lived in the women's wing and though I devoted myself in the days to come to hear any and all gossip about her, I heard nothing except that she was reclusive and difficult.[170]

Part of the difference may be attributed to the fact that Chade's performance as Lady Thyme is exactly that, a performance and therefore lacking the truthfulness of identity that The Fool has as Amber. There is a difference between the parody of a performance like Chades, and the change in outward "identity" that Amber represents. When discussing parodic performances, Butler states that:

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[169] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p148

[170] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p170

"There must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony. [...] What performance where will invert the inner/outer distinction and compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality? What performance where will compel a reconsideration of the *place* and stability of the masculine and the feminine? And what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire." [171]

Chade's performance can be seen as a part of the "repetitions [that] become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony."[172] As Fitz indicates in his phrasing of Lady Thyme as a "charade",[173] Lady Thyme is specifically designed to draw attention -- she's loud, obtrusive and yet, at the same time, known as "reclusive", all of which help to make her an interesting figure of speculation to the travelling group. She is a figure who parodies the idea of a demanding royal, disruptive to the party and drawing attention but not to any notions of gender.

No-one but Fitz knows that Lady Thyme is Chade, something which Chade actively ensures. There is subsequently no way for Lady Thyme to challenge gender beyond Fitz's limited perspective because no-one knows there is anything more to her. As such, Chade's performance becomes a part of the patriarchal hegemony, whereas what we find with The Fool is distinctly destabilising to that hegemony as it actively disrupts the binary

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[171] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* p179

[172] Ibid.

[173] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p170

understanding. Amber is a genuine version of The Fool, just as true as The Fool that Fitz grew up with, whereas Lady Thyme is inherently and overtly (once revealed to Fitz) false -- that which is true is often more unsettling than a false act.

However, within Fitz's quote we can see something very interesting occurring with the use of pronouns which complicates this idea that it is simply a case of parody/performance versus truth. When the quote begins, Fitz is referring specifically to Chade outside of the character of Lady Thyme and as such, uses the typically masculine 'he/him' pronouns. As the quote continues though, he begins to use 'she/her' in reference to Lady Thyme, smoothly transitioning between the two sets of pronouns: 'wait upon her,' 'her chambers'. It is only after this that we get a brief disruption to this smooth transition with narrator-Fitz commenting ''She'.' This quickly returns to the smoother, more natural use of the typically feminine pronouns. With this in mind, the disruption becomes a fascinating insight into the ways in which old teachings can rear their head again; while the first half of the quote could easily be read as from the young Fitz (much like the majority of the book) whereas the second quote more clearly comes from the older/narrator-Fitz with its references to devoting himself in the coming days as well as the line that follows the quote, 'How Chade created her [...] I never completely discovered.'[174] The dichotomy between the comfortable use of she/her pronouns versus the abrupt addition and disappearance of quotation marks around the pronoun demonstrates a difference between the automatic acceptance of a child versus the learnt disdain of an adult.

Fitz in the quote does, however, return to the casual and comfortable usage of traditionally feminine pronouns for Lady Thyme, mirroring what would come to pass between Fitz and The Fool. Though he is uncomfortable around his friend for a while, Fitz

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[174] Ibid.

does learn to accept and care for The Fool as zey are. Importantly, it is magic which makes this acceptance of The Fool's queerness possible. Fitz brings the Fool back from the dead by using the healing powers of Wit -- in doing so, the two swap bodies for a period as Fitz directs the body to heal his friend's wound. During this time, Fitz wonders about The Fool's non-human status:

> That night, I confronted completely his strangeness. I thought I had known him. In those hours of rebuilding, I realized and accepted him as he was. That, in itself, was a revelation. I had always believed we were more alike than different. It simply was not true. He was human only in the same way that I was a wolf.[175]

Ultimately, it is through magic that Fitz learns to accept The Fool as zey are. Furthermore, many fans have read Fitz's acceptance of The Fool as a partial acceptance of himself through the line 'He was human only in the same way that I was a wolf.'[176] In drawing comparison between the two of them and their attempts to blend in with groups they do not belong to, there is a sense that their otherness is of the same kind. Even without this, through his journeys, we see Fitz's encounter many characters and experience various challenges to the lesson's Burrich instils in him. As a result of these, Fitz learns to make peace with his gifts, and though he never fully accepts himself and is notably plagued by these lessons given how often they occur in his narration, it is evident that he has grown beyond blindly believing the internalised hatred Burrich imparted on him -- and that this is, in part, because of The Fool's continued presence and support within his life.

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[175] Hobb, *The Fool's Fate, 634*

[176] Ibid.

The *Realm of the Eldering's* series demonstrates 'how a nuanced magical framework, one that blurs binary distinctions between 'self' and 'other', can facilitate a renegotiation of gender identities and queer relationships.'[177] Throughout the various stories the series tells, magic exists as a constantly challenging force to the status quo -- either through characters who are magical themselves, or as a connective force in times of discord. As we established in the last chapter, at its core, all magic is the same. The Wit and Skill are two branches of one system, and though zey are connected to this system in zeir own way due to zeir different species, the prophecies and The Fool are also magic. That these prophecies come with a guaranteed connection (the Prophet and zeir Catalyst, a bond which will be explored in the next chapter) only serve to demonstrate this, as it further reiterates the notion that all magic is connection. The Fool is connected to the world through magic, and it is also magic which allows them to connect to who they are -- after all, it is zeir own innate magic that gives The Fool zeir shapeshifting ability and while zey have no expressed preference of form, this shifting is something zey find comfortable and even enjoyable as it allows zem to explore who zey are. It is this same magic which teaches Fitz to accept The Fool once again, to restore the connection between the two. As we shall see more in the next chapter, both of these character's depend on this connection to feel the truest to themselves. The bond between them is their most important source of support throughout the whole series, and it is a bond helmed by magic.

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[177] Lenise Prater 'Queering Magic: Robin Hobb and Fantasy Literature's Radical Potential' in *Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Popular Fantasy: Beyond Boy Wizards and Kick-ass Chicks* ed. by Jude Roberts and Esther MacCallum-Stewart (New York: Routledge, 2016) p30

CHAPTER THREE: LOVE – ROMANTIC AND OTHERWISE

As we began to explore within the last chapter, the Fool and Fitz are two characters who are inherently intertwined. The magic of the world and their bond as Prophet and Catalyst keep them linked forever, never straying far from the other's orbit in order to carry out their changes upon the world. With this in mind, the following chapter will further delve into the dynamic between the pair, building upon the last chapter's exploration of Fitz's journey to accepting The Fool's identity. As such, we shall be exploring notions such as inter-subjectivity, as well as focusing on the concept of 'radical care' within marginalised groups, in order to conceptualise what elevates their bond beyond friendship. We will also consider the ways in which this bond and the Fool's identity affect Fitz's own sense of self, exploring the pair's feelings for one another in new lights and highlighting the distinctions between gender, romantic attraction and sexuality. This shall first be tackled through the idea of 'prophetic pairs'/soulmates to keep in line with the magical world these characters exist within, before we begin relating it towards more grounded theories.

'Prophetic pairing' as an idea exists within fandom spaces (such as the Merlin Fandom on Tumblr, specifically around the so-called 'merthur' pairing) as a way to refer to a specific form of soulmates – i.e., those bonded due to either a prophecy about them or, more commonly, their joint roles within a prophecy. For example, if we understand the prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* as a type of prophecy, then they are a prophetic pair where the prophecy is about them and their relationship. Similarly, in the aforementioned popular BBC's fantasy-adventure show, *Merlin* (2008 - 2012), Merlin and Arthur form another prophetic pairing; in this instance they are both at the centre of the prophecy and have key roles in ensuring the prophecy comes to fruition which their relationship is meant to help. BBC's Merlin is a particularly poignant example of this concept as it is where much of the fandom usage of this idea can be seen, with a lot of fanfictions for the show choosing to focus

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attention on this bond and the ways in which it forms but also affects their relationship. In

the case of Fitz and The Fool, their respective roles as prophet and enactor create an inherent

binding between the two -- though they are not the centre of any prophecy, they are both

required for all prophecies that The Fool witnesses. In this we can understand prophetic pairs

as a form of soulmates, a concept which has played an important role throughout literature

and media in many different forms and genres.

One of the earliest references to the idea of soulmates comes from Plato's *Symposium,*

when Aristophanes discusses the notion that: "The sexes were originally three, men, women,

and the union of the two; and they were made round—having four hands, four feet, two faces

on a round neck, and the rest to correspond."[178] As humanity grew prideful and began

thinking about overthrowing the gods, Zeus decided to push humans, taking away their

"terrible… strength"[179] by cutting them into two and separating humans from their other half.

From then on, "the two halves went about looking for one another, and were ready to die of

hunger in one another's arms."[180] Stephanie Branson also factors in the literary precedent

around the concept when providing another term for "soulmates" as well as a definition for it.

Branson argues that, as the search for a soulmate is not tied to any religion, nor does it have

religious connotations, the use of the term 'soul' is inaccurate. This is because the term 'soul'

is heavily tied into Christianity and its' ways of thinking around human existence and

experiences. Instead, Branson recommends the word 'soul' should be replaced with a term

more reflective of the pagan concept of Fate, such as *Psyche*. From this term, she then puts

forward the idea of referring to the search for one's soulmate as an *epipsyche*: this term is

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[178] Plato, *Symposium,* trans. Benjamin Jowett (Project Gutenberg, 1999)

[179] Ibid.

[180] Ibid.

inspired by Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem *Epipsychidion*, or "little song of the soul". Branson

defined *epipsyche* through this influence by Shelley, coining it as

> "the literary expression of a thirst for union with a soulmate, a
>
> belief in love after death, an inevitable and inviolate joining of body
>
> and soul preordained by the cosmos, but mediated by individual will
>
> and understanding"[181]

Though Branson demonstrates the flaws of the term soulmate, she fails to provide an

adequate substitute, with epipsyche only referring to the search for one's soulmate, rather

than acting as a true replacement. Furthermore, while Branson focuses upon the Christian

influence within the term 'soul', under a more modern lens, the term 'soulmate' is far more

associated with notions of magic as a whole, rather than any specific religious ideology. As

such, this essay shall continue to use both terms and delve more into the flaws of the concept

and it's phrasing later.

With this definition in mind, the 'prophetic pair' idea fits within the notion of

soulmates, as does the dynamic between Fitz and The Fool specifically. If we breakdown

epipsyche into its required characteristics as laid out by Adela Catană[182], we can see this

encapsulates both. First, the soulmates must be "sympathetic entity outside of the self"[183] – be

that with another person, a spirit or an abstraction. So long as it is embodied, it can qualify as

detailed by Percy Shelley:

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[181] Stephanie Branson, Fated *Love: The Epipsyche in Literature.* Trans.Adela Livia Catană (Ars Dicendi: Bucuresti, 2015) P17

[182] Adela Catana, ' *"Star-crossed": Epipsyche in The Hunger Games'* in 'Representations of Identity in the literary, linguistic and cultural space' ed. Emilia Papal (Editura Universitaria Craiova & Editura ProUniversitaria București, 2016) p55-60

[183] Branson, *Fated Love* p18

"an understanding capable of clearly estimating our own; an imagination which should enter into and seize upon the subtle and delicate peculiarities which we have delighted to cherish […] a frame whose nerves […] vibrate with the vibrations of our own" [184]

If we return to what a young-Fitz says of his friendship with the Fool as discussed previously within the last chapter, we can see this mirrored in their relationship. When Fitz tells Chade that he likes spending time with The Fool, regardless of what others say about zem, Chade responds by telling Fitz to trust his instincts. This is taken by Fitz as a sign of approval for the friendship between himself and The Fool, as shown by his continued connections with the character. This tells the reader that Fitz's instincts draw him to The Fool – he sees the vague comments that Chade provides about listening to The Fool's warnings -- "Trust your instincts"[185] -- and, rather than simply taking them as they are, interprets them as acceptance and approval of the friendship. The phrasing of 'Trust your instincts'[186] can easily be interpreted as both the positive Fitz perceives it as ('Trust your instincts' here meaning to continue the friendship as you wish to) or as a word of caution ('Trust your instincts' as in 'stay on guard, trust yourself over whatever may be told to you'). Arguably, as the assassination mentor and therefore a spy-type character, it would be more in line with Chade's role and characterisation for the quote to fall into the latter interpretation. As such, in having Fitz draw such a definitive conclusion from vague commentary, Hobb conveys to the reader Fitz's internal desires regarding the friendship between the pair. He, at most, defies

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[184] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley.* (ed.), Neville Rogers (Clarendon: Oxford, 1972)

[185] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p195

[186] Ibid.

Chade's intentions and imposes his own ones in line with his desires and feelings, and at the least, subconsciously interprets the words in the manner most fitting for himself. We can see this sense of the pair being repeatedly drawn to one another throughout the series, on both sides, with each character often missing and wondering about the other whenever the pair are separated.

Furthermore, part of this draw is shown in the way in which the two understand one another. Throughout the series, they never experience any of the misunderstandings which characterise the majority of Fitz's relationships; for example, in the case of Fitz and Burrich, the pair spend many years with extreme tension as Fitz believes Burrich killed Nosy. Even once the truth is revealed to Fitz, this misunderstanding continues to cloud their relationship, as Fitz struggles to move past the pain and sense of betrayal. Burrich similarly struggles with a sense of betrayal which also affects the relationship, as he is hurt by Fitz's belief that he could have killed Nosy, as shown by his reaction ("All those years? And you never learned better of me, never thought to yourself, 'He would not do such a thing'?"[187]). Similarly, Molly and Fitz have many issues with communication, with assumptions and a lack of clarification or discussion around emotions and perceptions constantly haunting and hindering their romance. Molly doesn't know Fitz's true identity as the bastard child of Prince Chivalry, instead believing the young boy to simply be an apprentice within Buckkeep. Furthermore, though Fitz briefly considers telling Molly about his gift with the Wit – 'I viewed it as an extension of my strange new sense (...) I wanted to speak to her about it (...) but I feared (she would be) disgusted by it'[188] – it is before he understands what the Wit truly is. This is a

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[187] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p350

[188] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p180

scene where he doesn't realise what he is sensing is part of his gift, rather than a common experience.

This lack of communication and therefore understanding is contrasted with the dynamic between Fitz and the Fool. For them, the only time within which there is tension between the two, is when Fitz feels that his understanding of his friend has been threatened by the reveal of The Fool's queerer emotions, as explored within the previous chapter. This subsequently ties into the next component of epipsyche that Catană lists. Upon meeting one another, soulmates are said to carry a sense that the event of their meeting was orchestrated and guided by "a primordial force – fate – and written in the stars, and no one or nothing can prevent it from happening."[189] Importantly, this idea is brought into the bond between Fitz and The Fool only on The Fool's side as zey recognise Fitz as their Catalyst during the first true meeting between the pair:

> The Fool took no notice of my whispered comment. Instead, a finger was held aloft, as if to pause not only my thoughts but the very day around us. But I could not have focused my attention more completely on anything, and, when he was satisfied of this, the Fool smiled (...)
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> 'Fitz fixes feists fits. Fat suffices. It's a message, I believe. A calling for a significant act. (...) I believe it's got you.'[190]

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[189] Adela Catana, ' *"Star-crossed": Epipsyche in The Hunger Games'* in 'Representations of Identity in the literary, linguistic and cultural space' ed. Emilia Papal (Editura Universitaria Craiova & Editura ProUniversitaria București, 2016) p55-60

[190] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p120

Conversely, though Fitz is drawn towards The Fool, he nonetheless doesn't realise that there is anything deeper to their relationship within their first meeting. As such, Fitz represents another side of the soulmate trope and experience.

Though soulmates often recognise one another on some level upon first sight, this is not a guarantee. The 'Star-crossed lovers' trope is one of the most common expressions of the soulmates concept in literature and exemplifies this notion. Within this trope. there is the notion that, in some cases, the "Lovers have to face certain experiences, grow up and become self-realised in order to recognize and join with their soulmates."[191] The difficulties that define the 'star-crossed' trope are varied, sometimes represented as social barriers (such as in *Jane Eyre* (1847) where Mr Rochester is already married and Jane is of a lower class) or due to conflict and misfortune (such as in *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) from where the 'star-crossed' title originated[192], in which the eponymous couple are stuck on two sides of their families feud). Other times, the pair may refuse to accept one another, they are not mature enough to recognize each other. This may delay or permanently stop the realisation of their status as soulmates. In terms of Fitz and The Fool, this can be seen within Fitz's journey to accept The Fool as explored within the last chapter. It is only through Fitz learning to accept The Fool's identity, that he is able to overcome his discomfort around The Fool's feelings for him, and perhaps even reciprocate to some degree. We shall explore this reciprocation as the chapter continues.

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[191] Adela Catana, '*"Star-crossed": Epipsyche in The Hunger Games'* in 'Representations of Identity in the literary, linguistic and cultural space' ed. Emilia Papal (Editura Universitaria Craiova & Editura ProUniversitaria București, 2016) p55-60

[192] William Shakespeare, 'The Prologue'

Romeo and Juliet: Norton Critical Editions, ed by Gordon McMullan (W.W. Norton & Company; 2016)

While soulmates may be viewed as a rather intangible concept, we can also relate the notion, and subsequently, Fitz and the Fools experience to contemporary discourse around radical care, and specifically queer radical care. In doing so, we may combine the more magical leanings of the soulmate interpretation which are befitting of the world Hobb created, with the grounded strength of a theory such as radical care. This shall be demonstrated more later on in this chapter when we return to the soulmate lens in order to further explore the queer potential of the pairing between Fitz and the Fool.

The idea of radical care is most commonly associated with the work of Hobart and Kneese, who considered the powerful demonstrations and potential of connections and compassion within marginalised and neglected communities. When put into its broadest terms, we can understand radical care practices as a "set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds"[193] rooted around a central and connective concept of emotions such as 'empathy' and 'sympathy' – or in simpler terms, a series of acts of compassion. This can be seen on both large and small scales, as well as on overtly politicised and passively politicised levels.

For example, during both the women's movement and the civil rights era of the 1960s and 70s, physical health became a central concern and pillar in the effort to maintain the community resiliency against racism, colonialism, classism, sexism, and homophobia. In the United States, projects such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves (1970)* which served to distribute important information about female reproductive health, aimed to provide women the opportunity to understand their bodies and health needs. This was seen as an important way to not only address an inherent imbalance between the sexes (as information of the male body and health needs is, still to this day, more easily accessible and taught as standard) but also as

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[193] Hiʻilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese, *Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times* in *Social Text 142,* Vol 48 No 1, (Duke University Press; 2020)

a way to help take care of one another; within the preface of *Our Bodies, Ourselves,* the authors speak of a so-called "doctor's group"[194] of women, who meet to discuss the difficulties and frustrations they had around trying to receive adequate medical care when male doctors were condescending, judgemental and non-informative. As they shared this sense of frustration, the women of the group chose to do something about it, to research for themselves about their bodies, in order to help one another and others outside their group – a goal which culminated in the publication of the book, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.

In this example of a large-scale act of radical care, we can understand the notion of a 'precarious world' as referring to a literal case of instability caused by societal or governmental concerns, and therefore the care in response being a practical and widespread endeavour. This idea of community frustration in the face of a 'precarious world' can be seen within the *Realm of the Eldering's* series through the faction known as the Piebald's who appear within *The Tawny Man Trilogy.* The goal of the faction is to return to a time when those with the Wit were not only able to live freely and openly, but dominated over those without, in order to save their people and to try and ensure that they will never be subjugated again. While the group are canonically considered extremists, there is a level of understanding afforded towards the members who have joined; by the time the Piebald's are introduced, the reader has both witnessed the intense self-hatred Fitz is raised within in regards to his powers, and also encountered a group known as the 'Old Bloods', who peacefully do their best to help one another and fly under the radar. The frustration felt by the Piebald's in the face of their persecution is palpable and understandable, a sense which is only further compounded by the character Deerkin, who, upon learning the extreme plans of the leader, turns his back upon the Piebald's and begins assisting Fitz.

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[194] Our Bodies, Ourselves (Organisation), *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Simon & Schuster: United States,1973)

The example above is both large scale and actively political in its intentions – however, as we have already alluded to, this is not the only form radical care can take. While an often misconstrued quote within the current political sphere, Audre Lorde's words in *A Burst of Light* (1988) are particularly poignant for considering small scale and interpersonal acts of radical care: "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."[195] Within this quote, Lorde underlines the important realisation that caring for oneself (or other people) within a society that does not care for you, is to actively resist the attempts of that society to be rid of you. In ensuring your own self-preservation, you are defying and contradicting the wishes of wider society. This is further emphasised within a larger passage from *A Burst of Light* where Lorde described her fight against cancer, drawing parallels between the images of activist fighting for their rights and her body and cells fighting the disease: she connects the anonymity of cancer to the neglect and rejection of a governmental power faced by minority groups.[196]

If we search for a middle ground between these two extremes of direct self-care and wider, community care, we come to a sight that looks much like the experiences of Fitz and The Fool. Neither of the two have anyone they can truly rely on due to their unstable (i.e. precarious) positions within the social structure and hierarchy of both Buckkeep as well as the wider world of the series. As such, when the two begin to reach out to one another and learn to connect, this can be seen as a form of radical care within a limited community. As we shall explore throughout this chapter, the relationship between the two develops through them helping each other out during difficult moments – through this, they learn to depend on one another, bonding over these shared moments of compassion. While much of the conversation

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[195] Lorde, Audre. *A Burst of Light*. (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988)

[196] Lorde, *A Burst of Light*, p130

and discourse around the idea of radical care cautions "against the conflation of care with affection [...] and attachment"[197], it is also important to remember that it is impossible to completely devoid these notions from any form of care or discussion around care. Even just the continued use of the term "care" itself reflects how intertwined these emotions are to the concept, with the etymology of the word care showing a continued and repeated link to the idea of compassion across various languages: whether it is derived from the Old English *caru*, *ċearu* (meaning "care, concern, anxiety, sorrow, grief, trouble") or from the Proto-West Germanic *karō* ("care, sorrow, cry").[198] In this, we can see that care is as much about pain as it is fixing or helping that pain.

Now that we have two potential framings for viewing the dynamic between Fitz and the Fool, we shall begin to delve into the ways in which their relationship differs from friendship. During one of the earliest encounters between the two characters, we see the ways in which The Fool is discussed by others within the castle, highlighted by Fitz's biassed assumptions and commentary:

> I stopped in my tracks, astonished. Reflexively, I looked for the King, despite how ridiculous it would have been to find him here. But the Fool was alone. And outside, in the daylight! The thought made the hair on my arms and neck stand up in my tightened skin. It was common knowledge in the keep that the King's Fool could not abide the light of day. Common knowledge. Yet, despite what every page and

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[197] Murphy, Michelle. "Unsettling Care: Troubling Transnational Itineraries of Care in Feminist Health Practices." *Social Studies of Science* 45, no. 5 (2015) p719.

[198] Etymology of care, Online Etymology Dictionary https://www.etymonline.com/word/care

kitchen maid nattered knowingly, there stood the Fool, pale hair

floating in the light breeze.[199]

In this quote, the isolation The Fool is treated to becomes clear to the reader. The Fool being on zeir own, is only shocking in the context that ze is not with the king -- as shown by Fitz's immediate response to look for the King, specifically, rather than anyone else, even in a location where the King would have no reason to be. This demonstrates to the reader that, not only is The Fool not seen socialising with the members of the castle, but also that no-one else seeks zem out. It is the combination of The Fool being separated from The King as well as the idea that ze are own zeir own which is shocking to Fitz. This shock is what makes Fitz take a second look at his perception of The Fool, and only upon doing so does he begin to realise something important:

> [...] his eyes were not as colourless as they were in the dim
>
> passages of the keep. As I received their stare from only a few feet
>
> away in the light of day, I perceived there was a blueness to them, very
>
> pale, as if a single drop of pale blue wax had fallen onto a white platter.
>
> The whiteness of his skin was an illusion also, for out here in the
>
> dappling sunlight I could see a pinkness suffused him from within.
>
> 'Blood,' I realised with a sudden quailing. 'Red blood showing
>
> through layers of skin.'[200]

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[199] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* P119

[200] Ibid.

While this may, at first, sound like a detailed character description, this quote shows the moment in which The Fool becomes more to Fitz than just the stories told by "every page and kitchen maid."[201] In focusing on small details such as the pink tone from blood or the colour gradient of the eyes, the reader is forcefully reminded of their own body and of the human anatomy. This sensation combined with the almost clinical breakdown and description of these features ('blood [...] through layers of skin'[202]), contrast the almost mythicised version of The Fool that appears in the quotation just prior; as such, there is an overwhelming sense given to the reader that Fitz has realised The Fool is a person, just like him. This sensation is further heightened by the language of the quote as while it humanises the Fool, as we've just explored, it simultaneously dehumanises zem through its clinical breakdown. This juxtapositioning emphasises the realisation Fitz is experiencing and ties it into the notion of intersubjectivity, specifically in terms of Husserl's explorations of the concept.

Intersubjectivity as we will be exploring it, is a philosophical and phenomenological point of interest around the question of other's existence. Within philosophical debate, there is a repeated question of the validity of experiences, primarily concerned with our inability to reliable verify them under philosophies tight rubric. Under epistemological philosophy, in order to claim we *Know* anything, we must satisfy certain conditions – namely, that whatever we are claiming to know must be a Justified, True Belief.[203] This is important as, as many epistemological philosophers such as Descartes point out, when it comes to the problem of perception we would need constant, unfailing certainty that what we perceive is real. However, as our eyes are prone to fallibility (be that bad lighting, or general instances of our

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[201] Ibid.

[202] Ibid.

[203] While the Justified, True Belief is a highly critiqued and developed upon starting point, it is more than satisfactory for our explanation and avoids overcomplicating the issue at hand.

eyes playing tricks), this is not something we can claim to possess. As such, we then begin down a journey of uncertainty, where we must continually try to rationalise our belief in the world and other beings around us or decide that we as individuals can only truly believe and claim *Knowledge* of our own minds. Intersubjectivity is one way this problem has been approached, through its empathy-focused appeal as explained by Scheler:

> For we certainly believe ourselves to be directly acquainted with another person's joy in his laughter, with his sorrow and pain in his tears, with his shame in his blushing, with his entreaty in his outstretched hands, with his love in his look of affection, with his rage in the gnashing of his teeth, with his threats in the clenching of his fist, and with the tenor of his thoughts in the sound of his words. If anyone tells me that this is not 'perception', for it cannot be so, in view of the fact that a perception is simply a 'complex of physical sensations', and that there is certainly no sensation of another person's mind nor any stimulus from such a source, I would beg him to turn aside from such questionable theories and address himself to the phenomenological facts[204]

Ultimately, this approach rejects the argument that the relation between the self and the other is established through "analogical inference, and instead argues for [...] empathy, which is [...] allow us to experience and understand the feelings, desires, and beliefs of others in a

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[204] M. Scheler, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (Bern/München, Francke Verlag: 1973) p254

more-or-less direct manner."[205] In the quote from Scheler, we can see the same practice of

breaking down an experience to specific physical details and responses, as demonstrated

within the scene between Fitz and the Fool. Both of the quotations use this practice to

represent the point that "the body of the other differs radically from inanimate objects"[206] – it

is something which moves, responds and reacts, devoid of ourselves and our own thoughts.

As Husserl explores: "My experience as mundane experience (that is already each of my

perceptions) does not only entail others as mundane objects, but also and constantly in

existential co-validity as co-subjects, as co-constituting, and both are inseparably

intertwined."[207]

In realising this, he is able to connect with The Fool in a way he hadn't beforehand,

opening their relationship up to new possibilities. They provide care for another, checking in

with one other – for example, when the Fool hears Fitz was punished for stealing food, zey

check up on him, knowing it is likely that Fitz was stealing for Smithy, and would continue to

do so, even at the risk of punishment – as well as actively tending to the other's wounds.

While both of these examples are of The Fool extending care to Fitz, it is important to note

that this dynamic extends in both directions, however, Fitz's instances of this behaviour take

longer to display themselves, reflective of Fitz's longer journey into acceptance of their bond.

By the time the pair are together in Jhaampe, Fitz has undergone a massive shift in his view

of the Fool, and we can truly see him extending this sense of care towards the White Prophet:

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[205] Dan Zahavi, *Beyond Empathy: Phenomenological Approaches to Intersubjectivity,* in *Journal of Consciousness Studies,* Vol 8, No 5-7 (2001) p153

[206] Ibid.

[207] E Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie,* trans David Carr (1970)

I finally found my breath. 'Fool,' I sighed sadly.
'What have they done to you?' My parched mouth
could barely shape the words. I reached out my hand to
him, but the movement pulled the muscles of my back
and I felt my injury open again. The world tilted and
slid away.[208]

Though injured, Fitz's first concern is about what has happened to the Fool, the sight
of whom makes his "heart [turn] over in [his] chest."[209] This, importantly, is not simply an
emotional reaction towards the Fool's own injuries, but rather the beginning of a repeated
sentiment Fitz express upon sight of zem, as we seem as similar phrase appear in the *Fool's
Errand:*

"The tawny man approached silently save for
the rhythmic striking of his horse's hooves. When he
drew near, he reined in his beast with a touch, and sat
looking down on me with amber eyes. He smiled.

Something turned over in my heart."[210]

Returning to the moment from before, which marks a shift within Fitz's perception of
The Fool and signifies the moment in which their journey into meaning 'more' to one another
begins. From this shift, Fitz begins to view the Fool through a different lens -- one more akin

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[208] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest*, p181

[209] Ibid.

[210] Robin Hobb, Fool's Errand, (London, HarperCollins: 2001) p38

to how Fitz views his mentor, Chade and, importantly, himself. All three of these characters occupy unique and tumultuous social positions within Buckkeep and it is these positions which bind them; Chade is the bastard brother of the King, as well as the King's Assassin: Fitz is the bastard son of the Once-Crown Prince, and the Assassin's Apprentice: The Fool is the most mysterious and mistrusted member of the Kings household, a figure of constant speculation to always be watched. None of them are truly comfortable within the confines of the King's castle, outside of one another's company. As such, they theoretically should all be in position to provide radical care to one another due to the shared place in the margins of Buckkeep. However, this becomes complicated by the differing positions these characters share in one another's lives.

Chade, for example, carries a unique role of influence within Fitz's life, as the Mentor in both Assassin-hood and in the experiences of a Royal Bastard. However, this position of influence is as bonding as it is isolating, as it comes with an inherent internal hierarchy within the dynamic -- the mentor will always be framed as 'above' the mentee, or else be redefined as useless within the dynamic. As such, Chade and Fitz, while important to one another, can never be peers -- a sentiment which is further heightened when one remembers that they interact under the King's orders, rather than through their own volition.

Fitz and The Fool, on the other hand, are each other's first experiences of a true peer, of a community and of someone who provides care devoid of duty. Due to their similar experiences as outcasts from both ends of the social world of Buckkeep, the two characters understand each other in a way that no other character ever does. As such, they also become each other's first opportunity to experience community and care from within the community – an act which resists their societal placing in the margins, as the margins of society are expected and intended to be lonely and isolating in punishment for the

impropriety of non-conformity. We can see the resistance to this isolation highlighted in the contrast around understanding that exists between the relationship Fitz has with the Fool compared to any of his other emotional attachments.

Fitz's relationships are constantly full of miscommunication and assumptions which blur dynamics and muddy interactions -- The Fool is a distinct and singular exception to this. This understanding of one another is heightened even further by their magical connection as Prophet and Catalyst, which not only ties their lives together, but helps them connect, as they often feel drawn to one another. The deep understanding between the two characters is best exemplified in a scene from Chapter Thirteen of the *Assassin's Apprentice:*

> For now, he needed a name. I looked him over. He was not the curly-haired yappy type of terrier. He would have a short smooth coat, a thick neck and a mouth like a coal scuttle. But, grown, he'd be less than knee-high, so it couldn't be too weighty a name. I didn't want him to be a fighter. So no Ripper or Charger. He would be tenacious, and alert. Grip, maybe. Or Sentry.
>
> 'Or Anvil. Or Forge.'
>
> I looked up. The Fool stepped out of an alcove and followed me down the hall.

'Why?' I asked. I no longer questioned the way the Fool could guess what I was thinking.

'Because your heart will be hammered against him, and your strength will be tempered in his fire.'[211]

In this moment, The Fool is seemingly able to read Fitz's mind. This is not considered an ability of either White Prophets or the race of the Whites as a whole. As such, this scene is therefore instead reflective of the level of understanding between the Fool and Fitz. The narration even draws attention to this, with Fitz commenting that he "no longer questions the way the Fool could guess what [he] was thinking."[212] This quote shows the reader that this is not the first interaction that the two have had like this, but rather that this has become a commonplace feature of the dynamic between the two -- their understanding of one another transcends words, allowing them to predict the other's thoughts. If we keep in mind our prior exploration of intersubjectivity and its relevance to the relationship between the two characters, we can then view this line as a reflection of how far the pair have come in their relationship. According to Husserl, "had one had the same access to the other's consciousness as to one's own, the other would have ceased being an other, and would instead have become a part of oneself."[213] In the case of Fitz and the Fool, this idea of co-subjectivity, rather than eradicating one of them, strengthens them as they take solace in each other's presence and assistance. This is a particularly poignant distinction for their dynamic, as the idea of losing

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[211] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* pp 202-203

[212] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p203

[213] Edmund Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge,* (The Hague, M. Nijhoff, 1973) p139

oneself when "too connected" is the central and repeated concern about those with the Wit --

they become too much of the beast.

The fact that this heightened understanding is commonly demonstrated by the Fool

rather than Fitz is also reflective of their differing roles and personalities -- as both a jester

and someone who has visions, The Fool has learnt to be observant of others mannerism and

thought patterns, and therefore finds it easier to predict others behaviours. This can be seen as

an early indication of The Fool's greater awareness of their dynamic and foreshadowing the

fact that the Fool is able to acknowledge the intensity of their relationship long before Fitz is.

Furthermore, the fact that the Fool is assisting with the name of Fitz's new pup is also

a significant and symbolic detail. The pup, who would end up being named Smithy, becomes

one of the most significant Wit bonds that Fitz experiences. As we have explored previously,

the Wit bond is a soul deep connection between two living beings which fundamentally

affects a person's perceptions, emotions and experiences. As such, the Fool's involvement in

naming Smithy, a creature who becomes intrinsic to Fitz identity for the majority of the

Assassin's Apprentice, acts as a symbolic reflection of the impact that zey zemself have upon

Fitz's character, especially as the pair grow up alongside one another. Smithy even becomes a

shared responsibility between the two, with the Fool assisting with his care when Fitz is being

punished for taking food to feed him during his Skill training. This parallel of impact is

further solidified as the choice of name, Smithy, follows along from the Fool's suggestions --

as ze allude to with zeir explanation 'Because your heart will be hammered against him, and

your strength will be tempered in his fire'[214], the suggestions of 'Anvil' and 'Forge' are

references to a blacksmith's place of work, often called a 'forge' where an 'anvil' can be

found as it is a metalworking tool. With this in mind, it becomes clear that the name 'Smithy'

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[214] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice*, p203

is therefore derived from 'blacksmith', showing that, just as the Fool did, Fitz is also continuing the shared line of thought.

The relationship between the two continues to develop and deepen across the years, especially as Fitz learns to see more and more of the truth of the Fool -- moments such as his first time seeing inside the Fool's tower carry a weight to them as the foreshadow and reflect the developing depth of bond. This can also be seen in the increased amount of references to the character when zey are not around. Fitz spends much of his time in Jhaampe thinking about the Fool and even dreams of zem. He is easily reminded of his friend, as demonstrated by the following quote:

> I walked past the door that led to the bedroom of the reclusive King, past Rurisk's door, and to Kettricken's. Her door was decorated with hummingbirds and honeysuckle. I thought how much the Fool would have liked it.[215]

From the point of their reunion in Jhaampe, Fitz and the Fool are rarely separated for the rest of *The Farseer Trilogy,* with the Fool even commenting that Fitz knows zey "must go with [him]"[216] when Kettericken orders Fitz to accompany her, with no mention of the Fool. Fitz sleeps next to the Fool, nursing zem in zeir illness and keeping zem warm at night. In this time, they develop a magically recognised form of their bond:

> "I found it, faint as a silver shining thread. There was a Skill-bond between us."

> *"Ah. Is that what that is?* the wolf marvelled.

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[215] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest,* p362

[216] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest,* p208

Can you feel it, too?

*Only sometimes. It is like what you had with Verity [...]
But different. Fashioned more like a Wit-bond than a
Skill-joining*.

He looked up at the Fool as the Fool came out of the
tent. After a time, the Fool frowned to himself and looked
down at Nighteyes.

You see, said the wolf. *He senses me. Not clearly, but he
does. Hello, Fool. My ears itch*.

Outside the tent, the Fool reached down suddenly to
scratch the wolf's ears."[217]

It is important here to pay heed to Nighteye's words. Though Fitz identifies the connection as

that of a Skill-bond, Nighteye's words cast some doubt upon this, as the wolf refers to the

bond as being different than Fitz and Verity's skill bond, something "more like a

Wit-bond".[218] It is therefore worth keeping in mind that Fitz's assessment of the new bond is

clouded by his limited magical knowledge and the preceding experience. For example, in the

chapters prior to this interaction, Wit plays a very passive role within the story -- it's

references are few, and predominantly consist of Fitz and Nighteyes going hunting, either

together or apart, and with the few exceptions being vague and indirect ("His wolf watches

[217] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest,* p291

[218] Ibid.

with him [..] He can aid Fitz against this false coterie as no one else can."[219]) In contrast, the Skill is front and centre of the storytelling; Fitz and his travelling companions are being followed by Regal's Skill-Coterie as they travel along the 'Skill-Road' created by Verity, to whom Fitz is desperately trying to find due to the Skill-bond and compulsion Verity created with Fitz. All of this combined with the doubt of Nighteye's words, suggests that, to some degree, Fitz's identification may be clouded by the heavy presence of the Skill in his current thought-processes -- especially given his susceptibility to the Skill-Road. This notion of a potential mis-identification is further compounded by the demonstration of Fitz's lack of magical knowledge, especially around Skill; When Kettle intends to drug the Fool with elfbark in order to protect zeir mind from Regal's coterie, Fitz protests, claiming "Elfbark doesn't work like that"[220] and that elfbark is used to "restore [...] strength after Skilling."[221] However, Kettle quickly corrects this belief:

> "Elfbark is well known among Skilled ones as a thing to avoid [...] It deadens a man to Skill, so that he can neither use the Skill himself, nor may others reach through its fog to Skill to him. [222]

Kettles' distress within this scene helps to emphasise what she says here – "elfbark is *well known* [...] to avoid".[223] Fitz's lack of knowledge about the Skill is on full display within the scene, which occurs less than ten pages prior to Fitz's identification of the bond between

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[219] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest*, p284

[220] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest,* p283

[221] Ibid.

[222] Ibid.

[223] Ibid.

himself and the Fool. With this proximity between the scenes, it is subsequently worth considering how accurately Fitz would be able to identify a magical bond if Nighteyes is saying that this bond feels different to what Fitz has experienced between two people before. Continuing with this, as has just been alluded to, Fitz is used to considering magical bonds between people as Skill bonds, and bonds between people and animals as Wit bonds. To his mind, these would be distinctive categories, especially in the face of his limited knowledge and the lack of people other than himself who carry both magical abilities.

However, this is not to say definitely that what actually exists between the Fool and Fitz from this scene onwards is a Wit bond. Returning to Nighteye's words again, we can see that the wolf says the bond is "more like a Wit bond"[224] rather than claiming that it is one. Furthermore, Fitz is not the only one to assume the bond is a Skill bond. Kettle, who is viewed by the travelling party as someone very knowledgeable about the Skill, also seems to identify the connection as something Skill based -- specifically a Skill-link.[225] As such, it becomes apparent that neither the Wit or the Skill can be definitively assigned to the bond between the characters. Their magical connection is unique and just as confusing to identify as the emotional bond between the two, which is something other characters within the series struggle to identify – referring to the pair as "closer than brothers"[226] or assuming their relationship is sexual (something we shall return to and explore more soon). Ultimately, the bond that exists between the Fool and Fitz can be seen as either residing outside of the known magic of the *Realm of the Elderlings* series, or as a unique convergence of the two forms. In either way, the bond serves to disturb the binary just as much as the two characters involved in it do.

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[224] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest,* p291

[225] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest,* p281

[226] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest* p289

With this confirmation that there is, from *The Farseer Trilogy* onwards, a powerful and unidentified magical bond between Fitz and the Fool, alongside their emotional bond, we shall now return once again to the notion of soulmates. As we have previously acknowledged, the use of the term soulmates is somewhat problematic due to the Christian roots of the word 'soul' which assumes a certain religious component to the concept. One of the consequences of this Chrisitan influence upon the term is the assumption of certain qualities for a soulmate bond. Taking a look through the various definitions for the term as listed by Urban Dictionary (an important and unique dictionary which serves as a great way to keep track of contemporary perceptions of long standing ideas) we can see many similar ideas repeated: "The person that when you are with them you feel that all is right in the world"[227]; "you complete me"[228]; "Perfect Match".[229] Bradley Onishi describes the soulmate myth as promising "that amidst [a] dizzying and often confusing landscape [...] there is one [...] out there that will make sense of it all."[230] Onishi further elaborates this idea:

> "The soulmate myth promises fulfilment, It says that the isolation and loneliness that are so often part of the human experience are only temporary – that someday there will be a happily ever after in which we are united with The One who

[227] Iloveyouelliottritz, 'Soulmate' definition on Urban Dictionary https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Soul%20Mate [accessed 09/09/2023]

[228] Papabear5611, 'Soulmate' definition on Urban Dictionary https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Soul%20Mate [accessed 09/09/2023]

[229] NinjahLink, 'Soulmate' definition on Urban Dictionary https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Soul%20Mate [accessed 09/09/2023]

[230] Katie Bishop, *Why People Still Believe in the Soulmate Myth,* (BBC: 2022) https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220204-why-people-still-believe-in-the-soulmate-myth [accessed 09/09/2023]

understands us at every level, protects us from harm and gives our life overwhelming significance."[231]

This concept of perfection, and of the 'perfect match' is one that much of the rhetoric around queerness, especially at the time of Hobbs writing, is seemingly in direct opposition to. While in Plato's time, the idea that the soulmates, or 'conjoined beings' could vary, being either of mixed sex, or of two men or two women, would not seem out of place, "the Greek era's relative tolerance for select forms of homosexual activity (and expressions of homoerotic desire in literature) gave way to very harsh proscriptions against all sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage during the Christian era."[232] By 1995 (when *Assassin's Apprentice* was first published), though progress had been made, the queer experience had been fundamentally defined by, and associated with, the ideas of shame, of being lesser and of being imperfect. With this in mind, there is therefore a sense that queer love has no place within the term of soulmates -- an idea which has been unintentionally reinforced within many descriptions and discussions around soulmates.

If we return to the definitions on Urban Dictionary that we previously looked at, we can see that all of them carry an assumption of heteronormativity, within their examples: "Sam and Leah are soul mates"[233]; "Elliott and Kali are soul mates"[234]; "Why are Mom and

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[231] Ibid.

[232] Hall, Donald E, 'A Brief, Slanted History of "Homosexual" Activity' in Queer Theories (Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) p27

[233] Papabear5611, 'Soulmate' definition on Urban Dictionary https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Soul%20Mate [accessed 09/09/2023]

[234] Iloveyouelliottritz, 'Soulmate' definition on Urban Dictionary https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Soul%20Mate [accessed 09/09/2023]

Dad so happy all the time? … ".[235] Furthermore, even the BBC article in which Onishi

explains the promises of the soulmate myth carries a reflection of this notion: though the

image at the top of the article may be of two women, the article makes no mention of them,

or of any queer examples at all, instead focusing upon the heterosexual couple, Hannah and

Sam. The article further demonstrates an assumption of 'traditionality' as it pay's heavy

attention to the role of marriage within this idea of a 'perfect couple': not only does the

article open with Hannah and Sam's love story, in which they say "we knew that there was no

reason not to get married, because we were soulmates"[236], it also continues further to discuss

the rise in the soulmate as something linked to attitudes around marriage:

> "It's also facilitated by unprecedented prosperity in the
> West, which made people less dependent on marriage for
> economic survival. There was a shift from a pragmatic
> approach to marriage to a more expressive, soulmate model of
> marriage where people's expectations are more psychological
> and less material."

While the United Kingdom legalised same-sex marriage in 2013, a decade prior to the article

being written, marriage is still widely viewed as the traditional culmination of a relationship

between a man and a woman. Even nowadays, marriage's cultural significance is rooted in

predominantly heteronormative ideals, with many considering the main reasons behind

marriage to be ideas such as the traditional formation of a family, cultural and societal views

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[235] NinjahLink. 'Soulmate' definition on Urban Dictionary
https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Soul%20Mate [accessed 09/09/2023]

[236] Bishop, *Why People Still Believe in the Soulmate Myth*
https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220204-why-people-still-believe-in-the-soulmate-myth
(BBC: 2022) [accessed 09/09/2023]

around gender expectations, and economic and legislative status and prospects. While love certainly plays more of a part in the notion of marriage than it did prior to the twentieth century[237], it is rarely seen as the sole reason to get married, but rather the base motive upon which other culturally significant reasonings can be added onto (i.e. two people may love each other and, once they want to start a family, they will then get married -- it is not just their love that causes them to get married, but rather their love *and* their desire to start a family). This sense of traditionality creates a space where queerness is seen as out of place -- though same-sex marriage is legal, it is still debated and considered lesser, considered damaging to the idea of marriage and seen as a separate thing; after all, it is 'same-sex marriage' not just simply 'marriage'. This exclusion then transfers in turn onto the notion of 'soulmates' when marriage is seen as a part of the soulmate experience.

The idea of queerness as lesser is reflected in the world of the Six Duchies beyond the parallels seen in the language around the Wit. It is important to begin this section of our discussion with a consideration of how heterosexual couples are shown in contrast to the queer potential couplings. While many of the relationships shown, especially in the early books, are amongst the royal court and therefore would presumably be motivated predominantly, if not entirely by politics, this is not necessarily the case. In the case of Prince Chivalry and Lady Patience, for example, Chivalry explicitly courts and marries Lady Patience against the wishes of his parents, who consider Patience's temperament to be unsuitable for a future queen. Despite this, the pair have what is explicitly referred to as a happy marriage, even in the face of their struggles with infertility and infidelity. The love and care the pair share for one another is placed front and centre of their relationship from their

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[237] *How Marriage Changed Over Centuries*, (The Week, 2015)
https://theweek.com/articles/475141/how-marriage-changed-over-centuries [accessed 09/09/2023]

very introduction; Fitz never meets his father because Chivalry and Patience move from Buckkeep to the Withywoods following his abdication, all because Chivalry prioritises trying to fix the hurt he caused his wife with his infidelity. Even Regal acknowledges Chivalry's priorities, stating "I suspect Chivalry will feel differently about using his bastard in such a way. Especially as it regards dear Patience."[238]

Care also plays an important role in the relationship between Verity and Kettricken, despite its originally political motivations. This is most importantly demonstrated within Regal's attempts to meddle with the relationship before it can really begin. He attempts to essentially "poison" the relationship, by feeding Kettricken unflattering and misleading information about Verity, in order to dissuade her from the marriage- this is unintentionally thwarted by Fitz who was asked by Verity "to speak well of him to [Kettricken]".[239] In response to Fitz's descriptions, Kettricken states that he has "[given her] heart"[240] and assuaged her concerns about being wed to "an old man [...] to burdened by his duties to see a wife as anything other than another duty."[241] We know from the following events (Rurick coming to help Fitz survive in the aftermath of Kettricken poisoning him -- another component of Regal's machinations) that Fitz's words affected Kettricken deeply, as she questions everything Regal has told her. This uncertainty is what provokes her to tell her brother, Rurick, about her attempt to poison Fitz. What we can see from these interactions is the cultural importance placed on care and its role in strengthening a marriage. Despite being orchestrated for political reasons, namely uniting the Six Duchies and the Mountain

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[238] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice*, p15

[239] Hobb, *Assassin's Apprentice,* p339

[240] Ibid.

[241] Ibid.

Kingdoms, Kettricken was mostly worried about Verity and herself having nothing to connect over, or him having no care to connect with her. Similarly, Regal's machinations demonstrate a desire to endear himself to the Mountain Kingdom and Kettricken, and at the same time destroy the chance for a bond between Kettricken and Verity. This part of his plan has two potential reasonings, which most likely co-exists given the convoluted nature of Regal's plans: first, Regal believed that he would be able to control Kettricken through her care for him should he be the one to marry her. Secondly, should his plan current to get rid of Verity fail, or timelines change, the bond between the two would be weak, something that would reflect badly upon Verity within the court and therefore weaken his position -- especially in the face of the comparisons between Verity and Chivalry, when Chivalry was known for his bond with his wife. Ultimately, the complications Regal enacts upon Verity and Kettricken's bond demonstrate a cultural belief and desire that care must be a part of a marital union. This is further emphasised when Kettricken makes it known to Verity that she is lonely without her husband -- Verity sets aside the time, despite being incredibly busy with the war, to dedicate towards Kettricken, which brings them much happiness and closeness, from which they both draw strength to continue.

Within these examples, we can see that love, or at least, care is considered important to relationships, even one's where one might assume that it would be a lesser priority, such as a political marriage. Contrasting this, is the assumptions made about the bond between Fitz and the Fool. Multiple character, Fitz included, focus upon the sexual component of allonormative[242] relationships, and reflect this upon the bond, rather than reflecting the focus upon the emotional component which is afforded to the heterosexual couples within the

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[242] Allonormativity is the concept/assumption that all humans experience sexual and romantic attraction.

series. Rumours follow the pair regarding the nature of their bond, especially when the Fool

is known as Lord Golden, during the Tawny Man Trilogy, with some characters even asking

the two about the dynamic. Fitz spends several pages of *Golden Fool* unsettled by Prince

Dutiful's questions about their bond, an unsettled state which begins to spiral first when he

overhears a conversation between Jek and The Fool/Amber, during which zey confess zeir

love for Fitz, as well as stating "No one could spoil his face. Not for me."[243] This quote will

become relevant soon as we consider the differing forms of attraction. Fitz's state only

continues to spiral following a confrontation with Starling, with whom his relationship has

soured after he discovered that she was married and had misled him during their time with

her as his mistress. During the confrontation, Starling throws the following accusations:

> "Has your new master taught you his Jamaillian ways? Or was I wrong, all
> those years ago? Perhaps the Fool was truly a man, and you've simply gone back to
> what you preferred all along [...] Whose face did you see, all those times when you
> closed your eyes?"[244]

Their argument is about the breakdown of their sexual relationship and so it is this focus on

the sexual component which Starling focuses on. It is also this which disturbs Fitz the most,

with him throwing Molly's name at Starling in response to her final question -- he admits

himself that this is a lie but knows that this is the response that will hurt Starling the most.

Despite all this rage though -- a rage which even compels him to wish for Starling's death --

when his thoughts return to the Fool, he is just sad and lonely, wondering to himself "Why

had the Fool done this to me?"[245] This is a sentiment he repeats when he confronts the Fool:

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[243] Robin Hobb, *Golden Fool,* (London: HarperCollins; 2002) p121

[244] Hobb, *Golden Fool*, p127

[245] Ibid.

"I need to know, Fool. You look at me sometimes, you say things, apparently in jest, but . . . You let both Starling and Jek believe that we could be lovers. " The word came out harshly, like an epithet. "Perhaps you deem it of little importance that Jek believes you are a woman and in love with me. I cannot be so blithe about such assumptions. I've already had to deal with rumours of your taste in bed partners. Even Prince Dutiful has asked me. I know that Civil Bresinga suspects it. And I hate it. I hate that people in the keep look at us, and wonder what you do to your servant at night. "[246]

At this point it is important to clarify the difference between romantic and sexual feelings and desires. Sexual attraction is defined as an attraction that makes people desire sexual contact or shows sexual interest in another person(s); Romantic attraction, on the other hand, is attraction that makes people desire romantic contact or interaction with another person or persons.[247] This is important as, though Fitz begins with a focus on love in this quote ("lovers", "in love with me") , with language that would imply a conversation around romantic feelings, this quickly deviates into references about "bed partners" and "what you do to your servant at night." These latter quotes carry sexual implications, and it is this implication which Fitz addresses in his rebuttal: "I could never desire you as a bed partner."[248]

Though The Fool is hurt by this and seems to take it as a full denial of their potential relationship, this is the *only* denial Fitz gives. This is given directly in contrast to The Fool's

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[246] Hobb, *Golden Fool,* p153

[247] The University of North Carolina, 'Asexuality, Attraction and Romantic Orientation' on LGBT-Center : UNC-Chapel Hill
https://lgbtq.unc.edu/resources/exploring-identities/asexuality-attraction-and-romantic-orientation/

[248] Hobb, *Golden Fool,* p154

statement that zey "set no boundaries on my love. None at all."[249] As Fitz's denial directly follows from the above statement, rather than being a complete rebuttal and refusal of a non-platonic connection (as the characters seem to interpret it), it instead comes across as the setting of one singular boundary upon the love Fitz has for The Fool. The closest Fitz comes to denying romantic feelings for The Fool is in the lines:

> " And you know that I love you, Fool. As a man loves his dearest friend. I feel no shame in that. But, to let [...] anyone think that we take it beyond friendship's bound, that you would want to lie with me…"[250]

There are two things to note within this quote -- one, Fitz is oblivious to The Fool's love for him (or perhaps more accurately, deeply in denial), which is something The Fool did not anticipate, having believed that, even if the feelings were not reciprocated, Fitz knew zey loved him; and two, Fitz is once again focusing solely on the sexual component expected of romantic relationships. This repeated focus upon sexual attraction reflects the kingdom's views around queerness, which as previously discussed, limit the notion to purely the realm of the sexual. Once again, Fitz has internalised the societal opinions on what is and isn't appropriate, in an attempt to fit in and find a stable environment -- the same way he tried to internalise Burrich's lessons of Anti-Wit sentiment in order to protect himself. However, much like in that case, he's not able to fully "correct" or address the supposed issue. Fitz's hyperfocus upon the sexual comes at the expense of revealing flaws in his arguments: The Fool is in love with him, and he never denies romantic feelings, always being side-tracked by the denial of the sexual. Even when he claims to only love The Fool "as a man loves his

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[249] Ibid.

[250] Ibid.

dearest friend"[251], this is done with the knowledge that Fitz can only perceive queer romantic feelings through sexual attraction, not romantic.

This notion that Fitz is unintentionally highlighting a distinction between romantic and sexual attraction is further supported by The Fool's responses:

> "Did you ever truly believe I might seek from you something that you did not share my desire for? Well do I know how distasteful you would find that. Well do I know that seeking that from you would irreparably damage all else that we have shared. So I have always avoided this very discussion that you have forced upon our friendship. It was ill done, Fitz. Ill done and unnecessary. "[252]

While we could perceive this as The Fool referring to the whole conversation around love, and as an assertion that zey were never going to confess that zey loved him, this argument is muddled by quotes from The Fool that come before and after. On page 154, The Fool says:

> 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. You know I love you. I always have. I always will. " He spoke the words levelly. He said them as if they were inevitable.[253]

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[251] Ibid.

[252] Hobb, *Golden Fool,* p155

[253] Hobb, *Golden Fool,* p154

Though this quote, with its emphasis on them as "alone here" and no longer 'pretending', could be referring to Fitz subconsciously knowing that The Fool is in love with him, Page 155 adds another interpretation to the quotation.

> "This isn't from you, is it?" he asked. His voice was suddenly husky. He did not look at me.
>
> [...]
>
> Of course. They were never from you, not any of them."[254]

In this quote, The Fool is talking about the flowers zey have been receiving every day. As is clear from zeir words, zey believed these flowers to be a gift from Fitz though they now describe that idea as "a fatuous notion."[255] These lines tell us zey thought it was their feelings were, to some degree, understood and reciprocated. As such, returning to the quote about unreciprocated desires, a scene which comes beforehand, we can see why the idea that those lines were speaking about love as a whole does not quite line up. To The Fool, there has never been uncertainty about zeir feelings for Fitz. Likewise, to zem, there was no uncertainty that Fitz knows about these feelings, especially with how many people have tried to tell him. To therefore understand that quote as The Fool saying zey knew he would never love them back would be misaligned with what zey actually tell Fitz.

With all this in mind, I would instead propose that Fitz, while not experiencing sexual attraction for The Fool, may in fact experience romantic attraction and feelings for zem. One constant about the bond between the two is that, even when their own sense of identity is

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254 Hobb, *Golden Fool,* p155

255 Ibid.

compromised, the other always knows who they are. They understand each other in a way

that even the characters who can quite literally use telepathy to communicate cannot reach.

As such, it would fit in with this information that The Fool's assessment of Fitz was correct --

he did love zem, he just didn't feel sexual desire for zem. Fitz, on the other hand, is unable to

consciously identify this difference, being too influenced by societal teachings and

homophobia. This would render Fitz, and subsequently the relationship between the two, as

one on the asexual spectrum. This would not be out of character for Fitz -- though he has had

a few relationships which often focused on the sexual side (for example, his relationship with

Starling was most akin to a friends-with-benefits situation), as The Fool alludes to, these have

not been something Fitz himself pursued. The Fool states that Fitz "sate[s] [him]self with

whoever was available merely because it was offered".[256] This is not the description of

someone who actively pursues sexual desires, but rather someone satiating a bodily

compulsion for companionship, which falls in line with the loneliness Fitz often experiences

during his adventures.

Ultimately, this chapter explores the central thread of Hobb's work, and of this thesis

itself -- the powerful bond between Fitz and The Fool. These characters are so intertwined

that to discuss one without the other is to miss a large part of who they each are -- they are

bound by fate, by experiences, by magic and by love. They are soulmates, the product of

radical care and the most important people in one another's lives. Magic has chosen them for

one another and so too do they choose one another – even when faced with issues that could

break their bond, they work through them in order to accept one another, rather than just

exist, circling each other. While we began with the magical, we've grounded this connection

both in the character's own insights and in theory based on our reality. In doing this, we've

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[256] Ibid.

explored how, though magic is what first drew them to one another, and often operates as the most overt extension of their bond, it is just that -- an extension. There is much more going on beneath the surface and it is each of these qualities which allows them to always understand and accept each other, even when it takes them some time to get there.

CONCLUSION

When first approaching this project, the aim was to discuss and expand upon Waugh's argument that the fantasy genre's transgressive approach to reality has the "capacity to decentralise and subvert concepts of gender and identity."[257] In particular, I aimed to explore and expand upon this idea of transgression as a decentralising and therefore disruptive force by focusing specifically on the ways in which modern examples of the fantasy genre have utilised magic as an allegory for various aspects of the queer experience. This was to be explored through the study and analysis of three primary textual examples: the BBC's fantasy-adventure show, *Merlin* (which aired from 2008 to 2012); the CW's supernatural teen drama *Teen Wolf*, based off of the 1985 movie of the same name (which aired from 2011 to 2017); and, most relevantly to where this project ended up, Robin Hobb's speculative fantasy series called the *Realm of the Eldering's* (published over the span of two decades, from 1995 to 2017). Evidently, much has changed about this project since its beginning.

Though paraliterary due to its designation as a fantasy text, and therefore considered 'lesser' than more classical literary endeavours, the *Realm of the Eldering's* series was the most traditionally befitting of literary study and as such where I chose to begin. There was to be a chapter exploring the binary dynamic of the Wit and the Skill -- and its mirroring of the binary perception of sexuality through the rhetoric around both -- and a chapter on the genderless nature of the Fool and their love for Fitz. From there, I was to move on to *Merlin*, and the show's association between magic and femininity, and the notion of a 'prophetic couple.' Then finally, I intended to examine the history of the werewolf and the inherent homoeroticism of a man at war and taught to hate something natural that come from inside and is tied to his emotions, as well as the ways in which *Teen Wolf* inadvertently twist this by

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[257] Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (London, Routledge: 1989)

engaging in the marketing practice of 'queer baiting' most directly with its only human main character. However, as I began to research and write about Hobb's series, it became apparent that many of the things I wanted to delve into from other texts, especially *Merlin*, were firmly present within the *Realm of the Eldering's*. The Fool and Fitz are bound together by fate, in a manner even more intertwined that what we see between Merlin and Arthur. He is taught that he is less of a man because he possesses the 'wrong' kind of magic. Similarly, Fitz is taught to hate what comes from inside, his magic, the same way characters try to teach the werewolves in *Teen Wolf* to hate their wolves. All of this to say, things spiraled until the project now before you existed, looking a little different than originally intended.

As it now stands, we have a narrative that follows as such: Fitz is an outsider within the society of the Six Duchies, especially within his home of Buckkeep Castle, where he spends much of his childhood. While originally built upon his precarious social positioning as the bastard son of the once-Crowned-Prince, this sense of exclusion is heightened by his gift, or curse, of Wit. He is taught by Burrich, a fellow Wit-Haver and the closest thing Fitz has to a parent, to hate his Wit as it is -- to Burrich and the society of the Six Duchies -- an immoral, unnatural connection which renders him less human and specifically, less of a man. In teaching Fitz this, Burrich is actively instilling a sense of self-hatred within Fitz, for something that originally comes naturally to Fitz, and with which Fitz sees no issues, until he is taught to. This self-hatred is one which Burrich struggles with himself, as he constantly refers to the Wit as a temptation. In this, there are multiple parallels to homophobic rhetoric often espoused by more conservative groups, especially as the Wit is held in comparison to the highly respected and cultivated Skill in a binary comparison. These parallels subsequently frame the self-hatred shared by Burrich and Fitz into a form of internalised homophobia. However, at the same time, Fitz serves as a disruption to the system he is being indoctrinated

into; after all, he can wield both Wit and Skill. The same way a bastard is neither royal nor common, or a bisexual is neither hetero- or homo-sexual, Fitz's magic cannot be confined within their system of the 'good' skill or the 'bad' wit. He embodies both.

From here, we then move onto an exploration of another binary which exists within the land of the Six Duchies. Acting as a mirror to our reality, the world presented within the *Realm of the Eldering's* series carries within itself many of our own biases which are rooted in heteronormative and patriarchal ideals. This can be seen within the attitudes and treatments afforded to characters such as Lady Grace, as well as the differences between how Fitz's unnamed mother and his father, Prince Chivalry, are treated for having a child out of wedlock. This binary is first disturbed by Fitz and his magic, as reflected in the comments reminiscent of homophobic rhetoric around masculinity that Burrich preaches. It is then subsequently disturbed further and more deeply by Fitz's counterpart, known as The Fool. As an explicitly genderless character, The Fool naturally defies any attempts to categorise zem within the binary, notably stating when faced with questions around gender that zey think of it as "mere plumbing."[258] Almost every aspect of zeir character disrupts the world and assumptions around zem -- from zeir ambiguous appearance to zeir non-human status (and all that comes with that), zeir position within court to zeir love for Fitz. Zey are a character designed to resist categorisation and definition, especially from a binary system. This is only exacerbated as the series continues and our attention turns to consider books beyond *The Farseer Trilogy. The Liveship Traders* and *The Tawny Man* trilogies both feature The Fool under different names, with new appearances -- *The Liveship Traders,* most importantly, follows Amber, a version of The Fool who is presented as a distinctly feminised character. This fundamentally disturbs the binary system as it demonstrates not only The Fool's ability

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[258] Hobb, *Assassin's Quest*, p572

to, but explicit comfort with, switching between the differing sexes and the presumption (by other characters) of differing genders. This experience is explored within a few contexts, including through the lens of 'drag' (looking at the works of both Esther Newton and Judith Butler on the topic) which while not a hundred percent accurate match to The Fool's experiences, is the closest comparison to this physical fluidity. This disruption is also demonstrated within the series as we see, in contrast to The Fool's casual attitude towards zeir gendered experience, Fitz is distinctly unsettled and disturbed by the notion that The Fool may not be simple to understand; something which is only heightened by the implication and subsequent confirmation that the Fool loves him. He reacts as though he has been betrayed, in a demonstration of Burrich's lessons around masculinity and a display of how these lessons slowly corrupt.

This is not the end of the bond between Fitz and the Fool, however. Through magic, Fitz comes to understand and accept the Fool, proving once again that just as their bond is fundamental to their characters, magic is in turn fundamental to their bond. It is this bond which the final chapter considers, exploring its different interpretations. Starting first with an idea befitting the magical world of the characters, we begin with explorations around the idea of a 'prophetic pair' as a type of soulmate bond. With this comes questions around the terms soulmate and epipsyche, and the ways in which they interact both with each other, and the relationship being studied between the two characters. Before we can fully delve into one of the biggest flaws within the term 'soulmate' and how it intersects with the queer relationship at hand, we ground the relationship in terms more related to our reality -- in doing this, we explore the notion that while magic is the original motive for, and representation of their bond and the way it typically manifest most overtly (especially from Fitz, whose magic is fundamentally intertwined with his emotions), it is ultimately an extension of what is there

underneath, magnifying it. Alternatively, both radical care and intersubjectivity provide many insights into the relationship between the two, with intersubjectivity in particular adding more understanding to the way in which Fitz learns to accept the Fool through his magic. With this grounding then in place, we return to the question of queerness and the supposed perfection of the christanic notion of 'soulmate' and whether the two can exist. This provides the manner in which we consider how queerness is perceived amongst the inhabitants of the *Realm of the Eldering's* series. Throughout the series we see queerness perceived as an inherently sexual concept, seemingly devoid of the emotional components which characterise the perception of heterosexual relationships in the series. This perception both influences Fitz's uncertainty and discomfort around his bond with The Fool, and, at the same time, highlights another form of queerness through which the bond can be understood -- that is, as an Asexual relationship. We know that The Fool loves Fitz, a love he describes without "limits"[259] and Fitz's love in turn for The Fool is clearly demonstrated throughout the story. The only complaint Fitz ever actually verbalises is that he would never sleep with a man -- in the world of the series, the only lens afforded to queer relationships is a sexual one, which is what Fitz denies. He does not deny love.

While I am incredibly proud of the work I have done on this project, there are ways in which I would love to further expand upon it, that were unfortunately impossible during the course of it, due to various factors such as limited research or timing. One of the ways I would love to achieve this expansion would be to increase the influence and presence of fan culture and interpretations within the final version. As someone who grew up engaging in fandom spaces, especially ones focused on writing about the media they were based on, either

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[259] Hobb, *The Golden Fool,* p402

in terms of fanfiction or theorising, I firmly believe in the importance and relevance of these spaces, and what they can produce, to the study of literature and media in general -- while the field of English is still working towards this realisation, works within media studies by the likes of Mark Duffet (author of *Understanding Fandom*[260]) and Lisa Lewis (author of *The Adoring Audience*[261]) demonstrate this very importance. The very creation of this project and its thesis came from my time in these fandom spaces, seeing and discussing how characters, settings, whole worlds were viewed by different people -- how different upbringings, or cultural belief, or life experiences changed what we saw in these stories.

Within the original framework, there were many spaces designed to feature this influence; part of the reason *Teen Wolf* was chosen as a textual example was due to its interesting relationship with 'queerbaiting' and how that plays with the werewolf myth at the centre of its concept. This 'queerbaiting' actively aimed to engage these fan spaces, specifically to encourage the parts of the fandom whose perception of certain relationships was integral to their continued viewing. In teasing a queer relationship between characters (namely the werewolf Derek Hale and the human Stiles Stilinski), the writers and producers ensured that the fans invested in this dynamic would continue to watch, as they would never receive any satisfaction or dismissal to end their participation as audience members. Similarly, as alluded to in the discussion around 'prophetic pairing' seen in Chapter Three, the term is linked to *Merlin* and the fandom around it. Fanfiction in particular has been fascinated with the prophecy around the two characters, and how it binds them -- Merlin's knowledge about the prophecy shapes how he sees and interacts with Arthur, forcing him at

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[260] Mark Duffet, *Understanding Fandom* (Bloomsbury Publishing: 2013)

[261] Lisa Lewis, *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (London, Routledge:1992)

times to operate against his own safety and the interest of magic in order to protect the young Prince, while Arthur, in turn, is oblivious.

Once the framework for this project had changed, however, these spaces were far less prevalent. The fan community around Hobb's work is a lot more limited in scope as it is both a smaller and a less active fandom than either *Teen Wolf* or *Merlin.* For example, if we take a look at the fanfictions produced, we can see in the numbers a vast difference in engagement. Archive Of Our Own[262] (commonly known as AO3) is one of the most popular sites for the publishing of fanfiction and if we take a look at their tagging system (how fanfiction are marked and found throughout the site), we can see the following figures for each community: under the Teen Wolf (TV) tag, there are 123,547 separate fanfictions; under the Merlin (TV) tag, there are 54,385; and under the tag 'Realm of the Elderlings - Robin Hobb', there are 427. Breaking it down further into the main relationship tags for each series, we then get the follow information: the Derek Hale/Stiles Stilinski[263] tag carries 64,200 fanfics, the Merlin/Arthur Pendragon tag has 28,208, while the FitzChivalry Farseer/The Fool tag has 203.[264] While this may seem like something to be attributed to the differing ages of the fandoms -- Hobbs series, while ending in 2017 (the same year as Teen Wolf ended) began in 1995, over a decade before either of the other series' began -- I would caution against this as the sole interpretation for a few reasons. Firstly, looking at the fanworks that exist, as of writing this, the latest published fanfiction based on Hobb's work was published just yesterday (10/11/2023), thereby demonstrating that there is still engagement with the work occurring. This same engagement can also be seen over on Reddit and Tumblr. When this

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[262] https://archiveofourown.org/

[263] Within fandom spaces, relationships of a romantic or sexual nature are indicated with a '/' between the two names.

[264] All of these figures are based on the data present on 11/11/2023 and as such will inherently be subject to change by the time this is read.

information is put together, it demonstrates that, rather than begin a sign of a dead or dying fandom, the low number of fanfictions is, instead, reflective of a marked difference in the responses elicited by the various texts. Not only is the fandom around the *Realm of the Eldering's* series smaller, it is also geared more towards discussions and debates around the characters, their motives and relationships and the lore of the world around them. As such, sites such as Tumblr and Reddit see more activity as they provide space for commentary on the series. Reddit, in particular, has 19000 members within the community r/robinhobb, which is a community focused on 'Discussion and news for Robin Hobb fans.'[265]

If we take a look at the incredibly popular series, *The Hunger Games*, we can see a similar thing occurring. There are currently 17,852 works under the overarching 'Hunger Games Series - All Media Types' tag[266] and while this seems like a decent amount upon first glance, we can see compared to Teen Wolf and Merlin this is quite small within a popular fandom. There are a few vital details to note here as well which further confuse this small number. For example, The Hunger Games tag we are currently considering ends with the phrase 'All Media Types'; The Hunger Games series comprises of the original Trilogy of books, the four movies based on that trilogy, and then a prequel book and its recent movie adaptation -as of 2023, there are four books and five movies, unlike our other examples which either exist solely as books or tv shows. This tag takes all of these various forms in, meaning works solely based on the films and counted alongside works solely based on the books. Furthermore, one could argue with the inclusion of the prequel(s), there are two series counted under the one tag. Finally, as has already been alluded to, The Hunger Games series was incredibly popular -- the publishing of the original trilogy spanned 2008 to 2010 and

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[265] https://www.reddit.com/r/robinhobb/ (accessed 11/11/2023)

[266] Ibid.

during that time, received critical acclaim and developed a dedicated fanbase. By August 2012, the series ranked second, exceeded only by the *Harry Potter* series, in NPR's poll of the top 100 teen novels, which asked voters to choose their favourite young adult books.[267] On August 17, 2012, Amazon announced the *Hunger Games* trilogy as its top seller, surpassing the record previously held by the Harry Potter series.[268] Many credit the series for kickstarting the boom in teen and YA dystopian fiction seen during the early 2010s, with much of the following works seen as trying to emulate many aspects of The Hunger Games and its popularity.[269] Finally, the number, 17,852, includes a popular form of fanfiction know as Crossovers -- Crossovers, are fanfictions in which characters from various fandoms typically either meet on another or end up within the setting of another universe (for example, a common formula for crossovers with The Hunger Games series is a characters, such as the main cast from Teen Wolf, ending up as tributes within The Hunger Games arena). As the example may suggest, The Hunger Games fandom is one quite often used for Crossovers as its setting provides an interesting emotional background and space for the inclusion of many characters. As such, if we remove any fanfictions marked as Crossovers, the number drops to 14,835. Given the immense popularity of the series as demonstrated above, as well as the fact that the fandom has seen something of a 'renaissance' following both the 11-year anniversary and the release of new content (in the form of both the prequel book and movie), this is an

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[267] "Your Favorites: 100 Best-Ever Teen Novels" NPR. August 7, 2012
https://www.npr.org/2012/08/07/157795366/your-favorites-100-best-ever-teen-novels (accessed 29/11/2023)

[268] Julie Bosman,. *"Amazon Crowns 'Hunger Games' as Its Top Seller, Surpassing Harry Potter Series"*. The New York Times, August 17, 2012
https://archive.nytimes.com/mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/08/17/amazon-crowns-hunger-games-as-its-top-seller-surpassing-harry-potter-series/ (accessed 29/11/2023)

[269] Savannah Walsh, *'Nobody Ever Found the Next 'Hunger Games' -- But, Boy Did They Try'* Vanity Fair, March 24, 2022
https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/03/the-hunger-games-anniversary-teen-dystopia (accessed 29/11/2023)

incredibly small number. However, much as with the *Realm of the Eldering's*, if we turn to Reddit, Tumblr and, interestingly, TikTok, we can find the activity missing from the numbers on AO3. On Reddit, for example, r/HungerGames carries 93,000 members, placing it within the top 2% of Reddit communities based on size. Similarly, over on TikTok, the tag #hungergames has a combined 7.3 billion views, with one of the most popular content creators under the tag being the account @luckyleftie, whose videos discussing different theories and meanings from the series have repeatedly reached over two million views.[270] This is particularly relevant as it demonstrates that a fandom expressing itself more through theorising than fanworks is a recurring phenomenon, providing more validity for this understanding of the *Realm of the Elderlings* series; furthermore, much like *Realm of the Elderings, The Hunger Games* series consists of very tight world building and closed storylines for many of its many characters. This, as a shared trait between the two series, provides insight into why their fan engagement manifested as it did -- both stories are built in such a way that provides little for fans to work with.

Returning to *Realm of the Eldering's*, while these sites such as Reddit and Tumblr can be useful, due to their informal nature and limited scope, they are more suited to being starting points for arguments, rather than something that can be actively brought into (and therefore seen in) a project like this. Furthermore, the small size of the fandom means that what fanfiction does exist covers a narrower scope than the other fandoms in this discussion -- typically, the larger a fandom, the larger the body of fanfiction created and from there, the higher the chance that the fanfiction will engage in in depth explorations of the themes, the characters or the lore. As can be seen within the *Realm of the Eldering's* fandoms' limited body of fanfics, smaller and less active fandoms tend to produce shorter bodies of work,

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[270] https://www.tiktok.com/@luckyleftie (accessed 29/11/2023)

which commonly consist of "one-shots" which explore isolated and typically 'snapshot' scenes between characters. While this can reflect to us which relationships are considered important to a fandom (and an overview how those relationships are perceived), this is also less suitable for our studying than a longer form piece where the fanfiction writer will engage with questions around the original text as it ultimately reveals less.

Despite this, I am still incredibly pleased with the work I have been able to achieve here. During my research for this, I found a quote that stuck with me and resonated with my aims for this work:

> "But certainly in the early years of lesbian and gay studies, essentializing moves were made that had an important political purpose: to locate gays and lesbians throughout time with whom current readers and activists could identify and feel kinship. *This was a necessary process of recovery.*"[271]

In this quotation, Hall was focusing on the search and speculation surrounding the sexualities and genders of real people and fictional characters in older works -- a search through the past to try and create some semblance of the history which had been wiped out by society. This project likewise searches for this kinship within works more recent -- for as long as there is still hatred, and queer stories and experiences are defined by hatred, this 'process of recovery' continues. In exploring how magic has been used as a representation and conduit for the queer experiences, especially when set within a world were these experiences (both literal and metaphorical through the magic) are discouraged, shamed and ostracised, we can both connect to the characters on a deeper level of understanding, as well as contribute to this

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[271] Donald E Hall, 'A Brief, Slanted History of "Homosexual" Activity' in Queer Theories (Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) p43 [*my italics]*

building of a community in the face of destruction and hatred. Community and bonds are

integral to the human experience, just as storytelling is; and so, where else should we search

for evidence of these bonds and communities, then in our stories?

APPENDIX:

    1)

2)

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