“Telling it Slant”:
Queer Fantasy Rewritings of Cultural Myths and Legends

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Abstract

Beide adaptaties en de daarbij behorende adaptatie theorieën zijn enorm gegroeid in de afgelopen decennia, onder andere door de talloze soorten hedendaagse media. Nieuwe verhalen komen zo continu voort uit andere verhalen. Herschrijvingen hergebruiken en herinterpreteren bestaande teksten om normatieve verhalen tegen te gaan en minderheden een stem te geven. Op dezelfde wijze wordt het fantasy genre gebruikt om gemarginaliseerde groepen, zoals queer personen, te vertegenwoordigen. Hoewel er veel onderzoek is gedaan naar queer herschrijvingen en queer fantasy zijn er weinig studies die queerness, herschrijvingen en fantasy combineren. *The Song of Achilles* van Madeline Miller, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn* van Melissa Bashardoust, *She Who Became the Sun* van Shelley Parker-Chan en *The Priory of the Orange Tree* van Samantha Shannon vallen onder een recente trend van Engelse fantasy boeken die Aziatische en Europese culturele mythes en legendes herschrijven om queerness te representeren. Dit leidt tot een spanning tussen het dominante heteronormatieve verhaal van de bron en de toegevoegde representatie van identiteit en seksualiteit. Door middel van een kritische literaire analyse van de hoofdpersonen, hun relaties en hun omgeving onderzoekt deze studie hoe de herschrijvingen hun bronnen deconstrueren om heteronormatieve elementen te onthullen en vervolgens de verhalen herbouwen om queerness te representeren en dominante verhalen te ondervragen. Uit dit onderzoek blijkt dat heteronormatieve genderrollen, stereotypen en standaarden van de teksten worden tegengesteld tot de identiteiten en relaties die de ervaringen en gevoelens van queer personen benadrukken. De hoofdpersonages van de herschrijvingen doorbreken allemaal de norm, maar gaan op verschillende manieren om met de heteronormativiteit van de teksten. Deze boeken zijn de eerste stap naar representatie in literatuur die queerness niet alleen als acceptabel maar ook als kracht en macht gevend ziet.

Keywords: adaptatie, herschrijvingen, fantasy, queerness, heteronormativiteit

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Introduction

I Topic

While the popularity of literature and its genres rises and falls, some stories are timeless. Everyone has heard a version of the story of the half-god Achilles, invulnerable except for his heel, or Sleeping Beauty's curse to sleep until woken by true love's kiss. These narratives cross borders, cultures, and history. Unsurprisingly, many of these have made a return in modern literature too. There is a new trend of adapting, or more specifically rewriting, that focuses mainly on the retelling of mythology. Norse and Greek mythology are increasingly popular, especially on and because of social media such as TikTok and Goodreads where people can share or rate what they enjoy. Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology* and Stephen Fry's series of *Great Mythology*, including the books *Mythos* and his newly published *Odyssey*, make mythology accessible yet attempt to stay true to the original narratives. On the other hand, Madeline Miller, who wrote *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe*, as well as authors like Natalie Hayes, Jenifer Saint, and Rick Riordan have built their fame around fictionalised versions of the stories of Ancient Greece. While some consider these novels 'historical fiction', readers of the fantasy genre have claimed many of them as fantasy due to their connection to gods and magic. Similarly, rewritings of classic European fairytales like Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, and Rapunzel are still widely read. These stories often contain elements of the fantasy genre as well. Marissa Meyer rewrites fairytales in a sci-fi world, Sarah J. Maas in so-called fae courts, and many other standalone novels likewise add their own unique twists. Moreover, bookstores and the internet have seen a surge of inspiration from other cultures. The genre 'cultural fantasy' is still growing steadily, for instance through books like *The Wrath & the Dawn* by Renée Ahdieh or *We Hunt the Flame* by Hafsah Faizal. Even bigger is the popularity of novels inspired specifically by Chinese and Japanese myths and legends, such as *Daughter of the Moon Goddess* by Sue Lynn Tan, *The*

Poppy War by R. F. Kuang, or *Iron Widow* by Xiran Jay Zhao. Even at the time of writing this, fantasy rewritings appear continuously, like Ann Liang's *A Song to Drown Rivers* which was published in October 2024.

While many myths, fairytales, and legends have been retold for centuries, modern rewritings often highlight previously unseen perspectives and relate characters to the modern world. Especially those inspired by ancient history attempt to modernise the language, topics, and characters of their sources. They switch focus from originally male perspectives to female ones, or include queer perspectives where there were none before. Additionally, the involvement of gods, rulers, mages, or other powerful entities in these tales forces rewritings to interact with concepts of power and question what might historically have been seen as natural or normative. By introducing different perspectives and ways of reading these stories, rewritings contrast or even counter these dominant normative narratives. Despite being fictional, they thus have a deep connection to reality.

I aim to analyse the interaction of such fantasy novels with heteronormative and non-normative or queer narratives. In order to reflect the variety of inspirations and backgrounds of popular contemporary fantasy rewritings, I have selected four novels based on different cultural legends and myths. Even though they have different cultural backgrounds, these texts are all aimed at an English-speaking audience with a Western frame of reference. I am specifically interested in how all of these rewritings are written for and aimed at this specific audience, rather than the different cultural narratives themselves. Firstly, *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller builds on the events of Homer's *Iliad*, which describes ancient Greek legends from around the 8th century BC. Rather than being focused on the hero Achilles, the novel follows banished prince Patroclus before and during the Trojan war and describes how the two fall in love. Similarly, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn* by Melissa Bashardoust rewrites the popular European tale of 'Sleeping Beauty' and combines it with 11th century Persian myths.

Soroya, who takes the place of Aurora or Rosamund, is a princess cursed to be poisonous to touch. Rather than being rendered helpless until a prince saves her, she takes her fate into her own hands and falls in love with a female demon. On the other hand, *She Who Became the Sun* by Shelley Parker-Chan reimagines the legend of a 14th century Chinese emperor founding the Ming dynasty. In this story, however, the future emperor Zhu dies as a child and his sister takes his name, refusing to be contained by her own fate and gender. Finally, I will discuss *The Priory of the Orange Tree* by Samantha Shannon. It is inspired by multiple stories, including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ancient Japanese mythological tales in the chronicles the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*, and most importantly the 14th century tale of Saint George and the Dragon. The book follows four perspectives that revolve around the awakening of an ancient beast; a 'wyrm' supposedly slain by a Saint, or a princess, depending on the believed story. In various ways, all of these novels highlight how power and dominant voices can shift the way a narrative is told and remembered. These authors challenge normative narratives by shifting the narration to previously unheard or ignored characters, adding queer relationships, and questioning gender roles and norms. Nevertheless, their stories and worlds would not exist without, and in some instance outside of, their heteronormative sources. This tense, complicated relationship is exactly what this research will analyse.

II Literature review

Much like adaptations themselves, adaptation studies have expanded immensely over the past few decades. Literary and art critic Linda Hutcheon, known for her theories on postmodernism, argues in *A Theory of Adaptation* that adaptation has gotten out of control

and critics cannot seem to understand its appeal nor nature.[1] According to Hutcheon, the countless types of media is what complicates contemporary and postmodern adaptation.[2] Similarly, influential academic and film critic Thomas Leitch states in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*: "because its activities and perspectives continue to evolve rapidly, there cannot be any single or stable definition of adaptation."[3] Nevertheless, there are three popular definitions of contemporary adaptation: a product or 'transposition' of other work, a creative and interpretive process of appropriation, and intertextual engagement with a work.[4] As adaptation studies expanded, the focus of research has switched largely from fidelity criticism to more broader studies. For instance, Leitch highlights readers as agents of their own adaptations, while Hutcheon aims to challenge the idea that adaptations are secondary and inferior to their source.[5] Contrastingly, Julie Sanders' *Adaptation and Appropriation* pays special attention to appropriations, explaining that such texts differ from adaptations as they create entirely new cultural products through interpolation and critique.[6] Nevertheless, all of these ideas revolve around the idea that texts interact with each other. Hutcheon summarises: "art is derived from art; stories are born from other stories."[7] It is therefore no surprise that narratives not only inspire new ones, but are also fully rewritten themselves. In this sense, rewriting can be seen as a form of adaptation. Matei Calinescu suggests that the rereading of classic narratives generates ideas of rewriting, which to him is a combination of techniques of

[1] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, (London: Routledge, 2013), xiii.

[2] See note 1 above.

[3] Thomas Leitch, *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 34.

[4] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 8; Leitch, *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, 23; Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 25-26.

[5] Leitch, *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, 32; Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptaton*, 2-4.

[6] Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 35.

[7] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptaton*, 2.

literary composition like parody, adaptation, and translation.[8] He builds on the concept of hypertextuality by literary theorist Gérard Genette and argues rewriting involves a reference to intertexts that is of structural significance.[9] Christian Moraru falls back on hypertextuality as well, but more specifically defines postmodern rewriting not as 'underwriting' or support of the original, but as 'counterwriting'.[10] This directly contrasts other academics like Marian Rebei, who insists rewriting needs the 'sanctity' of the source text to be functional, since past literature guarantees authority and legitimacy.[11] Subsequently, many studies question whether some types of stories are more easily adaptable than others. Hutcheon mentions a historical interest in melodramatic stories, but her answer stays limited to cross-genre adaptations.[12] Many other researchers, however, consider an ancient and incredibly popular source of adaptation: mythology. Leitch claims that there is a long tradition of mythological adaptations, from the Greek and Roman variations of gods and heroes to modern canonised narratives of the *Odyssey* or *Ulysses*.[13] Similarly, Sanders writes: "mythical literature depends upon, incites even, perpetual acts of reinterpretation in new contexts."[14] She compares this to fairytales and folklore as well, claiming they have much in common with mythology because of their archetypal stories, which are extremely adaptable.[15] Moraru takes this all a step

[8] Matei Calinescu, "Rewriting," in *International Postmodernism Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1997), 243.

[9] Calinescu, 245.

[10] Christian Moraru, "Rewriting and Late Twentieth-Century Narrative," in *Rewriting*, (New York: State University Press, 2001), 9.

[11] Marian Rebei, "A Different Kind of Circularity: From Writing and Reading to Rereading and Rewriting," *Revue LISA* 2, no. 5 (2004): 1-10.

[12] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptaton*, 15.

[13] Leitch, *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, 26.

[14] Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 80.

[15] Sanders, 105-106.

further and argues some canonical popular fictions become part of a shared mythology, edited, read, and institutionalised constantly so they represent our own culture and identities.[16] Once again this shows how stories are constantly born from each other. Moreover, Moraru elaborates that rewritten narratives are critical rereadings that alter "model" stories from "marginal" standpoints.[17] Rewritings therefore create space for previously unheard voices. Similarly, sociologist Ken Plummer explores the concept of narrative power. This is the ability of a narrative to have power *over*; domination, or power *to*; empowerment, and argues it can cause damage as well as provide emancipation.[18] Therefore, there is inherent power in stories. Plummer further explains that counter-narratives, which aim to reject dominant stories and demand change, can provide a voice for minorities.[19] Likewise, Moraru states that women's rewriting often has a clear political and cultural agenda to use its power and counter silence and misrepresentation.[20] This can be seen in recent studies of contemporary rewritings of myths and fairytales. Research by Ioana-Gianina Haneş, Katarzyna Szmigiero, and Ka Yan Lam analyses how these narratives are brought to the present and given new meaning by feminist principles. Haneş claims that such rewritings put their source text through a process of deheroisation and demythologisation, fully rebuilding the myths from its foundations by refocalising the narrative's perspective.[21] Since such stories are often about heroes or rulers, rewritings are left with much room to

[16] Moraru, "Rewriting and Late Twentieth-Century Narrative," 3-8.

[17] Moraru, 9.

[18] Ken Plummer, *Narrative Power: The struggle for human value*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 22.

[19] Plummer, 76-77.

[20] Christian Moraru, ""Re-Lettering" Hathorne: Kathy Acker and récriture feminine," in *Rewriting*, (New York: State University Press, 2001), 143.

[21] Ioana-Gianina Haneş, "Margaret Atwood: The Penelopiad – Rewriting in Postmodern Feminine Literature," *Journal of Humanistic and Social Studies*, no. 9 (2019): 10-12.

discuss the significance and power of the narratives. Likewise, Lam views fairytale reimaginations as a form of restorying and reshaping by changing settings, characters, and perspectives.[22] On the other hand, Szmigiero falls back on a tool Leitch calls "revisionist adaptation," which relocates or actualises the narrative to point out differences between the two texts.[23] Mythological retellings, Szmigiero states, supplement and replace dominant narratives in both classical mythology and research on it.[24] Additionally, she emphasises Sanders' point that mythical literature is appropriation at its very core: "contemporary authors do not attempt anything more scandalous or sacrilegious in their retellings, as each period took their liberties with the ancient tale, adding its own flavour."[25] Indeed, both Leitch and Sanders admit that history itself is an interpretation that involves a constant process of rewriting.[26] History as well as mythology, fairytales, and legends have thus proven a fruitful base for fiction and rewriting.

The aim of many rewritings seems to be to subvert traditional or normative narratives and instead suggest a new framework or perspective. In addition to this, Szmigiero points out that many mythological rewritings contain features of genre fiction, such as fantasy and romance, to make the narrative accessible for readers.[27] Similar to adaptation studies, genre fiction and fantasy in particular have faced stigmatisation. Mark A. Fabrizi introduces *Fantasy Literature: Challenging Genres* by referencing J.R.R. Tolkien's influential essay

[22] Ka Yan Lam, "Engaging with Critical Literacy through Restorying: A University Reading and Writing Workshop on Fairy-Tale Reimaginations," *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 35, no. 2 (2022): 218-19.

[23] Katarzyna Szmigiero, "Reflexivity and New Metanarratives: Contemporary English-language Retellings of Classical Mythology," *Discourses on Culture* 20, no. 1 (2023): 247.

[24] Szmigiero, 96-97.

[25] Szmigiero, 104.

[26] Leitch, *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, 578-85; Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 181.

[27] Szmigiero, "Reflexivity and New Metanarratives: Contemporary English-language Retellings of Classical Mythology," 105.

"On Fairy-Stories", which attempts to reinvest the term "escape" as a way a text brings release, rather than an indication of superficiality and immaturity.[28] In fact, argues Fabrizi, the fantasy genre uniquely forces readers to reflectively engage with the text since they cannot rely on their usual expectations of the world.[29] In *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn further explore the many definitions and types of fantasy literature. They elaborate that the major theorists in their field "all agree that fantasy is about the construction of the impossible," but tend to focus exclusively on nineteenth and twentieth century texts, their own opinions, and that of audiences.[30] Regardless, this gap in research has received more attention in the past decade. The popularity of contemporary fantasy has forced more academics to take the genre seriously by means of representation and inclusion. Nathan Fredrickson, who wrote a chapter in James and Mendlesohn's work, explains: "fantasy genre provides a useful, relatively detached space for critical thought regarding the representation of marginalized and stigmatized people."[31] This is especially true for categories like gender and sexuality. In a later chapter, Martha M. Johnson-Olin analyses assumptions about fairytales as cultural fantasies, since modern versions have been rewritten with time and context to keep them relevant.[32] Similarly, Margaret A. Robbins and Jennifer Jackson Whitley describe a growing trend in strong and independent female protagonists in fantasy.[33]

[28] Mark A. Fabrizi, *Fantasy Literature: Challenging Genres*, (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016), 1-2.

[29] Fabrizi, 2-3.

[30] Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1.

[31] James and Mendlesohn, 58.

[32] James and Mendlesohn, 89-90.

[33] James and Mendlesohn, 93.

Furthermore, Robbins and Whitley maintain that speculative fiction such as fantasy is important for providing a queer space since queer literary theory at its heart is about challenging the familiar and "is a disruption of what is considered normal."[34] Heteronormativity, the idea or assumption that heterosexuality and gender binary roles are standard and normal, is usually questioned in this. Yet in his introduction to *Queer Popular Culture*, Thomas Peele explains that many contemporary representations only portray queerness as acceptable, rather than empowering queer individuals and communities.[35] Queerness here relates to sexual or gender identities that challenges established binaries of gender and sexuality, particularly heterosexual or cisgender norms. By including queerness in popular culture on a larger scale, Peele hopes to reshape existing cultural narratives about nonnormative sexuality and gender identity, and with that queer identity as well.[36] Recent studies on queer representation in fiction focus largely on young adult fiction. Julia Dielmann for instance criticises the minimal representation in historical fiction and argues it is most likely due to the erasure of queer history.[37] Elizabeth English's *Lesbian Modernism* reflects on the same lack of representation for lesbianism in genre fiction, which she claims allowed the opportunity to explore queer desire and identity despite literary censorship.[38] On the contrary, Carrie Spencer highlights the narrative possibilities in young adult novels to challenge normative sexualities, especially in genre fiction like fantasy, but also in fairytale

[34] James and Mendlesohn, 96.

[35] Thomas Peele, introduction to *Queer Popular Culture*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1-2.

[36] Peele, 7.

[37] Julia Dielmann, "A Balance Between the Real and the Fictive: Writing Nuanced Queer Representation in Young Adult Historical Fiction," *Leaf Journal* 2, no. 1 (2024).

[38] Elizabeth English, introduction to *Lesbian Modernism: Censorship, Sexuality and Genre Fiction*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 2-5.

retellings.[39] As such, the fantasy genre and queer narratives have been combined in many stories and studies. English states the othered, nonnormative status of fantasy aligns with women's writing that rejects patriarchal foundations.[40] She adds that especially lesbian authors can utilise the potentially utopian space of fantasy to explore sexual themes.[41] Other studies have explored this intersection further, such as Roderick McGillis who analysed Victorian author George MacDonald and his revisions of traditional fairytales. McGillis views 'queering' as not conforming to conventions and arousing confusion, illustrating a "continuing tradition" in fantasy and rewritings.[42] Other academics such as Wendy Pearson examine queerness in science fiction, which imagines a future where queerness is normalised and joins queer theory in questioning systems of thought.[43] Nevertheless, Jude Roberts and Esther MacCallum-Stewart explain in their introduction to *Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Popular Fantasy* that the contemporary discourse on gender and sexuality especially reflects a need to further open up discussions and perspectives on the topic.[44] It becomes clear that despite more attention, there is still room for growth. They write: "diversifying these approaches is useful, presenting the complexities of representation

[39] Carrie Spencer, "Queer (Im)possibilities of Bisexual Desires in Selected US Young Adult Novels," *International Journal of Young Adult Literature* 3, no. 1 (2022): 1-4.

[40] Elizabeth English, "Fantasy," in *Lesbian Modernism: Censorship, Sexuality and Genre Fiction*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 28-29.

[41] See note 40 above.

[42] Roderick McGillis, "A Fairytale Is Just Fairytale: George MacDonald and the Queering of Fairy," *Marvels & Tales* 17, no. 1 (2003): 89-98.

[43] Wendy Pearson, "Alien Cryptographies: The View from Queer," *Science Fiction Studies* 26, no. 1 (1999): 2-4.

[44] Jude Roberts and Esther MacCallum-Stewart, introduction to *Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Popular Fantasy*, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 2.

through multiple lenses, and thus demonstrating how far fantasy literature is capable of reaching in different directions."[45]

Indeed, contemporary fantasy literature has reached far and wide, bringing together narratives of all kinds. There is a recent reemergence of rewriting that few of these studies take into account, namely reimagined myths and legends in fantasy settings that focus on queer representation. To return to my own primary sources, Szmigiero included the hugely popular novel *The Song of Achilles* by Miller in her research. Miller herself is well-known for the rewritten myths she has published, which foreground previously minor characters in a mythical semi-historical narrative of gods, magical powers, and spirits. Szmigiero describes the combination of fantasy, romance, and alternate history fiction in such rewritings and addresses their popularity and potential for literary criticism.[46] Nevertheless, other studies that mention Miller, for instance discussing mythological fan fiction or fictional adaptations, tend to either focus on rewriting, queerness, or mythology, but never combine all three. Miller paved the way for other queer rewritings like Shannon's *The Priory of the Orange Tree* and Parker-Chan's *She Who Became the Sun*, which were read and lauded in a similar way yet have to date not been discussed in academic criticism. Many other rewritings followed, sometimes praised or criticised, but most were dismissed quickly by readers and critics as copies of their sources or money grabs following a trend. Only some stories managed to stay afloat amongst the many other rewritings. Bashardoust's *Girl, Serpent, Thorn* was one of them, gaining some fame after being part of 'Fairyloot', a massively popular book subscription box for fans of the fantasy genre. All things considered, I aim to

[45] Roberts and MacCallum-Stewart, 6.

[46] Szmigiero, "Reflexivity and New Metanarratives: Contemporary English-language Retellings of Classical Mythology," 108.

analyse these four novels as queer fantasy rewritings of myths and legends to add onto the existing research on these topics and respond to the previously mentioned research gap.

III This research

Following the discussion of existing research above, I have formed the following research question. Through the use of critical theory and close analysis of *The Song of Achilles*, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*, *She Who Became the Sun*, and *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, I aim to answer: how do 21st century fantasy novels in English that rewrite Asian and European cultural myths and legends about heroes and rulers from the 14th century and before show a tension between heteronormative and queer narratives through the representation of gender and sexuality?

In order to form an answer to this question, I will consider the following two sub-questions in the body chapters of this research. First and foremost: how do these rewritings deconstruct the narratives of their source texts to reveal heteronormative relationships and identities dominant in the source texts as well as in the subsequent rewriting? By analysing my primary sources and researching the myths and legends these novels were based on, I aim to get an insight into which narrative elements of the source texts remain in the rewriting. This could be by choice, either with the purpose to reflect or criticise the original heteronormative narrative, or subconsciously. Secondly: how do these rewritings rebuild existing narratives to include representation of gender and sexuality that question dominant narratives of power? In this chapter I will analyse any narrative elements that have been added to the source text to represent the non-normative. By considering both of these analyses, I aim to get a better insight into how heteronormative and non-normative narratives function in these rewritings and answer my research question.

IV Theoretical framework

To eventually get to a conclusion about the mentioned research questions, I will utilise various critical theories to analyse my primary sources. At the centre of this research is Plummer's book *Narrative Power*. The sociologists defines narrative power as a narrative's ability to both empower and dominate people by either providing imagination and emancipation, or causing exploitation and damage.[47] Narrative action indicates actions that are needed in order to bring stories alive and cause them to be social events.[48] Without interaction, narrative texts are without consequence.[49] Finally, I will use Plummer's definition of the counter-narrative, which seeks change and does not accept dominant stories. More specifically, rebellious narrative actions within or through rebellious narratives find ways to reject such dominant stories and instead give a voice to minorities.[50] In my research I will analyse novels that rewrite and queer existing myths and legends as results of rebellious narrative action, since they reject dominant narratives and instead highlight queerness. I view rewriting as the transformation of a source into a brand-new text that is inherently connected to both its source and its own context, as defined by Calinescu.[51] However, I also want to consider Moraru's view of rewriting as critical, innovative, and most importantly his definition of counterwriting. This means the source text distances itself from the literary past it rewrites, but also removes itself from the dominant forces in its own environment.[52] Similarly, Sanders explains appropriation is a more decisive adaptation away from the source

[47] Plummer, *Narrative Power: The struggle for human value*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 22.

[48] See note 47 above.

[49] Plummer, 25.

[50] Plummer, 76-77.

[51] Calinescu, "Rewriting," in *International Postmodernism Theory and Literary Practice*, 243-245.

[52] Moraru, "Rewriting and Late Twentieth-Century Narrative", 4-8.

text into an entirely new product, often by critiquing or adding new elements.[53] She adds that such narratives can simultaneously contrast and enrich them rather than 'rob' them, as is often assumed.[54] I intend to highlight this combination of support and critique of source texts and contexts of the rewritings in my own analysis.

Furthermore, I will briefly define the genres this research focuses on. James and Mendlesohn state that fantasy literature is incredibly difficult to pin down.[55] They explain that studies on fantasy have only concluded that the genre is about the "impossible", but any subgenres feel transient and profit-focused.[56] Similarly, Fabrizi comments it is a complex genre that highlights unfamiliarity, but most importantly both offers escapism and addresses important subjects of life like morality, death, and diversity.[57] I therefore view fantasy as speculative fiction that reflects our own world but contains impossible fantastical elements such as magic or supernatural creatures. The subgenre historical fantasy utilises such fantastical elements to reimagine the past and, writes Veronica Schanoes, represent "the ways of knowing and making sense of the world that are excluded by the dominant discourse of history."[58] Additionally, I refer to both legends and myths separately. I consider a legend to fit more with this fantasy subgenre, since it is regarded as a widely believed, traditional historical narrative often about a famous individual that cannot be proven to be true. On the other hand, a myth is a classical or traditional story that "extracts events from an everyday

[53] Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 35.

[54] Sanders, 53.

[55] James and Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, 1.

[56] James and Mendlesohn, 1-2.

[57] Fabrizi, *Fantasy Literature: Challenging Genres*, 1-2.

[58] Veronica Schanoes, "Historical fantasy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 236-237.

into the world of gods and the supernatural," as written by Sanders.[59] This includes both fairytales and mythology. Both of these can overlap and share characteristics.

As previously explained, countering dominant narratives can give a voice to minorities, or in the case of my own research allow for a queer space where queerness can be safely represented. According to Anne Mulhall in *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Theory*, queer theorists have used narrative theory to redefine sexuality, but also sex, gender, and other categories such as race.[60] She defines the queer narrative as the focus of queer studies on how narratives produce, police, and destabilise norms.[61] Some academics of queer studies have taken this redefinition or destabilisation of categories a step further. In *Queer Post-Gender Ethics* Lucy Nicholas explains queer deconstruction as critiquing, challenging, and breaking down identity categories, in particular binary categories such as hetero/homo or male/female.[62] I intend to apply this concept of deconstruction on a narrative level by using it to analyse how rewritings take apart the building blocks of existing stories to question them. Nicholas further explains that subsequent reconstruction offers a potential for forming positive ideas about politics, social relationships, identity, and the future.[63] This concept returns in both adaptation and rewriting theory as well. For instance, Moraru explores rewriting as "renarrativization" that must reconstruct a storytelling structure, while Haneş calls it "refocalisation," in which a legend or myth "is rebuilt from its foundations."[64] I will

[59] Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 82.

[60] Anne Mulhall, "Queer Narrative," in *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies*, ed. Siobhan B. Somerville, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 142.

[61] See note 60 above.

[62] Lucy Nicholas, introduction to *Queer Post-Gender Ethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2.

[63] Nicholas, 4-7.

[64] Moraru, "Rewriting and Late Twentieth-Century Narrative", 20; Haneş, "Margaret Atwood: The Penelopiad – Rewriting in Postmodern Feminine Literature," 12.

use the term rebuilding instead, which combines these interpretations and includes Nicholas' queer theory. By first analysing the rewritings as deconstructions of dominant, heteronormative narratives and subsequently exploring the rebuilding of these narratives into brand-new cultural products, I aim to gain a better understanding of how these stories use other existing narratives for new and different purposes.

V Method and overview

In the two subsequent chapters of this research I will analyse my primary sources with the theory discussed above to answer my research questions. Chapter 1 will address the first sub-question and focus on heteronormative narrative elements in both the source text and the rewriting. By close-reading and comparing the two solely focusing on heteronormative elements, namely normative sexuality, gender identity, and gender roles, I will analyse how the deconstructed source texts carry over heteronormativity to the rewriting. Additionally, I aim to search the rewritings themselves for the same elements. In this analysis I will focus on three main aspects: the protagonists, relationships between characters, and environment and worldbuilding of the narrative itself. This third section will consider the influence of the source text on the set standards of the rewriting, making the chapter slightly longer than its counterpart. Subsequently, Chapter 2 will answer the second sub-question regarding the representation of queerness. I will return to the source material and assess what has been added to their narrative by the authors of my primary sources in terms of represented sexuality, gender identity, and gender roles. I will then analyse how these additions differ from the heteronormativity discussed in the previous chapter, once again focusing on the protagonists and their relationships. Overall, I expect that the queer fantasy rewritings will reject their dominant heteronormative sources by opposing the remaining elements with

queer characters and their actions. I expect this challenge causes the tension between heteronormative and queer narratives, emphasising nonconformity and rebuilding dominant texts to create a space for queer individuals.

Chapter 1: Heteronormativity

Literature and the fantasy genre, although having grown and expanded immensely over the years, was and remains a largely straight, male-dominated space. Due to the internet and the impressive global publishing and reading market, however, fantasy novels by queer and non-male authors are getting more attention. Rewritings create the opportunity to not only represent unseen perspectives, but also fully deconstruct and reshape narratives of the past. In an interview by Waterstones, the author of *She Who Became the Sun* Parker-Chan says: "When we take back history by "telling it slant", we're using the master's own tools to dismantle his house. We're remaking the world, with a place for ourselves in it."[65] However in dismantling this history, as they state, authors must also deconstruct all the values and norms that excluded minorities in the first place. The aim of this chapter is to analyse heteronormative gender and sexuality in narratives through the protagonists, their relationships with other characters, and the environment and worldbuilding they exist in. This will provide an answer to the sub-question: how do these rewritings deconstruct the narratives of their source texts to reveal heteronormative relationships and identities dominant in the source texts as well as in the subsequent rewriting? The analysis will shed light on the inherent heteronormative elements of these narratives and how the source texts provide a foundation for rewritings based on dominant norms and stories. Rewriting can both reinforce old and create brand-new standards that limit the representation contemporary rewritings aim to achieve.

[65] Mark Skinner, "Shelley Parker-Chan on the Real-Life Inspiration Behind She Who Became the Sun," Waterstones, 20 July 2021, https://www.waterstones.com/blog/shelley-parker-chan-on-the-real-life-inspiration-behind-she-who-became-the-sun.

1.1 Protagonists

The reader views the world of a book through the eyes of a focaliser. Their relationship with other characters and their environment is what brings the narrative itself to life. The introduction, role, and progression of the protagonists throughout both the source texts and rewritings can therefore reveal underlying heteronormative elements that exist in or have carried over between the narratives. These elements assume a gender binary with assigned gender roles, and makes heterosexuality the norm.

1.1.1 *The Song of Achilles*

One of the oldest existing pieces of literature that has survived partly through its numerous adaptations is Homers epic poem the *Iliad*. Similar to Homer's *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*'s narrative about the Trojan war is still widely known and has thus remained part of a collective memory. Although academics like Szmigiero argue even authors like Homer simply added their own flavour to existing narratives, contemporary authors like Madeline Miller reveal many unexplored perspectives to popular myths.[66] Regardless, if history itself is a constant process of reinterpretation and rewriting as Leitch and Sanders write, elements of heteronormativity in the source are bound to linger.[67] The *Iliad* focuses primarily on how the half-god Achilles navigates the war with Troy and conflicts in the Archaean army. Homer declares his central role in the narrative in the first line: "Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilles and its devastation."[68] Achilles is immediately judged by his power and violence, held to an impossible standard. He is expected to be invulnerable and win the war, yet is criticised for

[66] Szmigiero, "Reflexivity and New Metanarratives: Contemporary English-language Retellings of Classical Mythology," 104.

[67] Leitch, *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, 578-85; Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 181.

[68] Richmond Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 59.

his emotions. This expectation relates to a broader hetero-masculine standard of male strength and stoicism, revealing the dominant role of power in this narrative. Patroclus, the protagonist of *The Song of Achilles*, is held to the same standards. The exiled prince is introduced as "Menoitios' son" and usually described as Achilles beloved companion, but has no large role in the first half of the *Iliad*.[69] Only when he takes up Achilles' armour, joins the battle for Troy and dies a hero's death does he gain any importance. The same theme of power and violence is highlighted in *The Song of Achilles*, mainly through the opposition of the protagonist Patroclus and Achilles. As previously described, Haneş argues that Homeric rewritings use a process of deheroisation and demythologisation to link the narrative to a contemporary feminist ideology.[70] Heroes are thus given more human qualities, which Miller highlights. The rewriting starts years before the Trojan war takes place and describes the young protagonist Patroclus as weak despite his lineage. "My father was a king and the son of kings. He was a short man, as most of us were, and built like a bull, all shoulders […] Quickly, I became a disappointment: small, slight. I was not fast. I was not strong."[71] Achilles, on the other hand, is introduced as a golden-haired, youthful yet manly prince, and according to Patroclus' father exactly what a son should be.[72] As the novel progresses it becomes clear that Achilles is the ideal warrior while Patroclus refuses to even learn soldiery.[73] Despite being a respected warrior in the *Iliad*, Patroclus is nauseated by battle in *The Song*: "I did not kill anyone, or even attempt to."[74] Only when he puts on Achilles'

[69] Lattimore, 67.

[70] Haneş, "Margaret Atwood: The Penelopiad – Rewriting in Postmodern Feminine Literature," *Journal of Humanistic and Social Studies,* 10.

[71] Madeline Miller, *The Song of Achilles*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), 1.

[72] Miller, 3.

[73] Miller, 85.

[74] Miller, 226.

armour, Patroclus momentarily steps out of his companion's shadow and somehow gains his partner's godly fighting skills and kills soldiers, including a son of Zeus.[75] Yet in attributing his only achievement in the *Iliad* to magical armour, the novel highlights Patroclus' incompetence. The male protagonists in both of these texts are supposed to possess masculine, physical power, yet judged as incompetent or weak if they do not conform to this heteromasculine standard. By 'deheroising' Patroclus but leaving the standards he is held up to unchanged, the protagonist is made powerless rather than emancipated.

1.1.2 *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*

On the other side of the gender binary, there is female subordination and passivity. This opposition can be seen in stories as old as time, such as fairytales. Sanders argues that the archetypal stories of myths and legends make them ideal for 'recycling', but fairytales possess an even more unique set of signifiers that "seem to transgress established social, cultural, geographical and temporal boundaries."[76] The history of 'Sleeping Beauty' reveals this very fact, since its origins can be found in old Germanic, Old Norse, and even ancient Egyptian.[77] The brothers Grimm recorded the best-known version of the tale told by Charles Perrault in the nineteenth century and called it 'Little Brier-Rose'.[78] In Melissa Bashardoust's version of this tale, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*, the fairytale is combined with elements of other narratives such as 'Rappaccini's Daughter' by Nathaniel Hawthorne and the eleventh-century Persian epic the *Shahnameh* for her worldbuilding.[79] However, as Sanders warns, despite the

[75] Miller, 312.

[76] Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 105-106.

[77] D. L. Ashlimann, "Sleeping Beauty," University of Pittsburgh, revised 26 November 2023, https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/type0410.html.

[78] See note 77 above.

[79] Melissa Bashardoust, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*, (New York: Flatiron Books, 2020), authors note.

'everywhere and nowhere' context of fairytales, the reworkings that have previously attempted to tie the stories back to one context often ended up restricting the tale and excluding outsiders of that context.[80] This rewriting of 'Sleeping Beauty' reveals this very struggle. Even in older versions, sleeping beauty always has little agency. In 'Little Brier-Rose', princess Rosamond's parents invite only twelve wise women to a feast, causing the thirteenth to curse the princess. After she pricks her finger on a spindle, she sleeps for a hundred years until a prince finds her in the thorn-covered palace and wakes her with a kiss. In this entire narrative, Rosamond is little more than an object; everything happens *to* her. She is mostly referred to as "maiden" or "princess", representing her passive role in the story.[81] Bashardoust rewrites this tale with princess Soroya at its forefront, who is hidden away in a tower because she is poisonous to the touch. While her brother becomes the shah, a monarch, as the firstborn daughter she was cursed and must remain in the shadows.[82] Eventually it is revealed a serpent demon called the Shahmar vowed to steal and marry her, and so Soroya's mother cursed her own child to 'save' her. This Shahmar also turns out to be Azad in disguise, a soldier who helps Soroya find her freedom. Ironically, this renders her nearly as passive as Rosamond. Soroya is claimed, cursed, and saved by people with hidden agendas, giving her a false sense of agency. Moreover, the princess' view of herself is so negative she can hardly imagine herself being powerful. Soroya continuously refers to herself as a monster, comparing herself to the serpentine Shahmar or hating herself for defending herself when attacked or tricked.[83] Additionally, when she does gain power she fears it and

[80] Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 107-109.

[81] D. L. Ashliman, "Little Brier-Rose," University of Pittsburgh, revised 16 February 2015, https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm050.html.

[82] Bashardoust, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*, 6.

[83] Bashardoust, 25; 105; 260.

needs other people to tell her what to do, like Azad or her love interest Parvaneh.[84] Despite being the protagonist, she makes very few choices that drive the story forward, even at the very end: "What would she do if Parvaneh didn't return in time? What would she allow herself to become?"[85] Soroya is continuously excluded in her own story, oftentimes by herself. Unfortunately, the story ends up playing into the helpless princess archetype that renders her passive and an outsider.

1.1.3 *She Who Became the Sun*

Much like myths and fairytales, legends based on historical events or people revolve around perspectives and reinterpretation over time and culture. According to Veronica Schanoes, historical fantasy interrogates why historical representations are considered mimetic of reality and which version of 'real' they present.[86] Especially a legend of a historic individual, she emphasises, "inevitably acquires a baggage train of tales, anecdotes and romantic stories over and above their actually historical career."[87] The rise to power of Hongwu emperor Taizu of Ming, also known as Zhu Chongba or Zhu Yuanzhang, is a real historical event that has been retold as a legend. The emperor's rise from nothingness to eventually end the Mongol rule in fourteenth-century China has been fictionalised in many Chinese books and dramas.[88] Unfortunately, the emperor was also renowned for his cruelty during his rule, as he ordered over 100,000 executions and forbade the empress or eunuchs, servants that are castrated often

[84] Bashardoust, 52; 89.

[85] Bashardoust, 283.

[86] James and Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, 236-237.

[87] See note 86 above.

[88] David B. Chan, "Hongwu," Britannica, updated 25 November 2024, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hongwu.

to protect or serve women in court, to participate in politics.[89] Noticeably, these last facts are often a less prominent part of Zhu's legend. As Schanoes explains, the narratives of Zhu Yuanzhang present a partial version of him, making power and violence central to narratives about him. Shelley Parker-Chan follows the general events of the emperor's life, but completely rewrites his character in *She Who Became the Sun*. The novel introduces a nameless peasant girl who is destined for nothing while her brother, Zhu Chongba, will reach greatness. However, the boy dies and the girl takes his name, vowing to take his fate. Like the real Zhu Chongba she joins a monastery, becomes a rebel and eventually rises to power, but must do so as a boy since "her fate had always been nothing. She had never had a choice."[90] Moreover, Parker-Chan makes it clear Zhu is tricking Heaven and running from death, as only a boy should have been able to follow her path.[91] This heavenly disapproval reflects the general perspective of history, turning a blind eye to any female potential or achievements. In this way, the novel seems to note Zhu's transgression of the norm, both in her actions and her fluid gender identity. Zhu is continuously described as an insect or cricket, which is often used to insult her looks or value: "That little black cricket? Better to give us one five years older, and prettier."[92] Both as a girl and boy she is criticised for not looking the way she should, implying she is wrongfully defying gender norms. Likewise, Zhu's behaviour also stands out as non-conforming. She is not only used to cooking and cleaning, but also knows "women's work" like braiding, carrying buckets or folding paper flowers.[93] The only way she

[89] Mark Cartwright, "Hongwu Emperor," Worldhistory, 13 February 2019, https://www.worldhistory.org/Hongwu_Emperor/; Chan, "Hongwu," Britannica, updated 25 November 2024, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hongwu.

[90] Shelley Parker-Chan, *She Who Became the Sun*, (New York: Tor Books, 2021), 26.

[91] Parker-Chan, 41-47.

[92] Parker-Chan, 22.

[93] Parker-Chan, 38-39; 53.

can prove herself to be a man is through violence; winning wars, taking cities, murdering her enemies. Noticeably, the narrator continues to use feminine pronouns when referring to Zhu, reminding the reader of a gender performance whenever other characters use masculine pronouns. Lastly, the novel shows the perspective of eunuch general Ouyang who mirrors the protagonist. Ouyang's family was killed by Mongols and as a boy was involuntarily made into a eunuch, causing a complicated relationship with his gender. While characters like Zhu describe him as beautiful and feminine, he is also referred to as a creature who defiles others by simply existing: "Fuck eighteen generations of that bastard's dogs ancestors! How dare he act like that, when he's nothing but a *thing*?"[94] Ouyang's own opinion of himself is equally negative. He despises his own non-masculinity and considers the shame of being mutilated and gender non-conforming as the equivalent of death.[95] Evidently, retelling Zhu Yuanzhang's life brings connotations with power and compliance with heteronormative standards. The novels protagonists cannot escape existing gender roles and critique on non-conforming gender identities, even in their own eyes.

1.1.4 *The Priory of the Orange Tree*

Finally, heteronormativity is found even in protagonists that seem to contrast the enforced standards. *The Priory of the Orange Tree* is inherently about adaptation and appropriation. The book narrates a conflict between East and West, one governed by a draconic monarchy and the other by matriarch Queen Sabran. However, a prophecy foretells the return of an ancient wyrm, a fire dragon called the Nameless One, intent on destruction. At the heart of Samantha Shannon's narrative is the story of 'Saint George and the Dragon', its oldest

[94] Parker-Chan, 88.

[95] Parker-Chan, 314-315.

versions dating back to Ancient Greek and eleventh-century Georgian texts.[96] In the original tale, Christian knight George comes across a city sacrificing children to keep a dragon appeased. When the princess Cleodolinda is chosen, Saint George kills the dragon and converts the city to Christianity, only to be beheaded for his beliefs. In this story, George is the epitome of an ideal man; powerful, righteous, and generous. Contrastingly, Cleodolinda is merely portrayed as crying and begging.[97] This opposition, as described earlier, is central to heteronormative ideas about gender. Shannon utilises the dynamic and adaptable nature of narratives to make Saint George and the Dragon part of her world's history, rather than its active plot. A large part of *Priory*'s world believes 'Sir Galian' to have defeated the Nameless One and created a kingdom and religion, while mages from the secret institution 'the Priory of the Orange Tree' know the truth; 'Cleolind' was not a damsel but 'the Mother' who destroyed the wyrm. Regardless of a division in the protagonists' beliefs, the reader is overwhelmed with mention of the Saint and forced to assume the initial, heteronormative version of the legend. This sets the precedent of how the characters are viewed. Eadaz du Zāla uq-Nara, mage of the Priory, must pretend she is lady Ead Duryan who believes in Saint Galian rather than the Mother to protect Queen Sabran. Despite her knowledge and power, which she immediately shows off by killing a cutthroat infiltrating the royal chamber in her introduction, she must pretend to be oblivious and scared: "'The Great bedchamber.' Ead hoped she looked shocked. 'Then someone in the Upper Household has betrayed Her Majesty.'"[98] Until the end of the novel, when Ead's identity and beliefs are revealed, she must remain 'Ead' and even receives a title of Viscountess Nurtha against her will: "I can play the

[96] D. L. Ashliman, "The Legend of Saint George," University of Pittsburg, revised 7 October 2024, https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/stgeorge1.html.

[97] See note 96 above.

[98] Shannon, *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, 16.

part of Lady Nurtha,' she said, 'but it will always be a part.'"[99] Ead is given no choice and forced into a passive role. Contrastingly, banished alchemist Niclays Roos cares little about anything to do with Saints. In fact, he is instantaneously characterised as a cynical, lying drunkard who only cares for himself: "silver *was* tempting. He had played one too many drunken games of cards with the sentinels and owed them more than he was likely to make in a lifetime."[100] As the story goes on, Niclays continuously gets away with things due to his scholarly background and gender. Characters instinctively trust him despite his attitude, and he is viewed as knowledgeable when he is usually simply lucky. This comes to a head when he accidentally succeeds in performing a surgery on a pirate ship and then solves a puzzle he has carried for decades within a minute by thinking of his deceased lover Jannart.[101] Despite Ead and Niclays' contrast to stereotypes of gender and their own beliefs, they are forced into normative roles that are based on a partial, equally heteronormative narrative of the past.

All things considered, the protagonists in both source and rewriting reveal underlying heteronormativity in depicted gender roles and identity. Patroclus and Achilles portray the effect of enforced heteronormative masculinity, while Rosamund and Soroya are punished when defying their subordinate roles. Likewise, Ead and Niclays are judged by a partial, dominant narrative of the past and Zhu's real and imagined life are inherently connected to gender-based power. Such heteronormative roles are deeply embedded in both narratives and critique non-conformity, showing the influence of dominant narratives of power on even rewritten narratives.

[99] Shannon, 562.

[100] Shannon, 6-7.

[101] Shannon, 375; 436.

1.2 Relationships

Heteronormativity, especially relating to standards and assumptions of heterosexuality, are also present in relationships between characters. Although these rewritings emphasise queer relationships, they have an inherent connection to the dominant heteronormative source texts and occasionally utilise harmful modern views and tropes that enforce the same normative narratives. This can be seen in the roles of both individuals in these relationships, how they function, but also how they are treated in their environment.

1.2.1 *The Song of Achilles*

Although Homer does not directly state Achilles and Patroclus have a romantic or sexual relationship, Miller was not the first one to imagine their love. According to Manuel Sanz Morales and Gabriel Laguna Mariscla, notable figures like Plato and Socrates discussed whether the couple fit the Greek roles of *erastés*, lover or protector, and *erómenos*, beloved, which made relationships between men acceptable at the time.[102] Both Patroclus and Achilles were seen as protectors by sacrificing themselves for each other, but also as taking the role of beloved companion. In fact, Homer often pictures Patroclus obeying Achilles' requests, listening passively to his music, and even tending to his and his guests' needs in terms of cooking.[103] In *The Song of Achilles*, Miller expands on this view of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship. As previously discussed, the two contrast each other not just in physical descriptions, but also in combat skills. While Achilles thrives in battle, Patroclus is described waiting patiently for his return. Their dynamic is nearly domestic: "I knew he killed men every day; he came home wet with their blood, stains he scrubbed from his skin before

[102] Manuel Sanz Morales and Gabriel Laguna Mariscal, "The Relationship between Achilles and Patroclus according to Chariton of Aphrodisias," in *The Classical Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2003): 292.

[103] Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer*, 203.

dinner."[104] Patroclus also discovers a skill for healing, further adding to the opposition of masculine hero and gentle housewife. This archetypal characterisation of a homosexual relationship is incredibly harmful, as it forces queer individuals to conform to heteronormative roles. Homosexuality is often only deemed acceptable if the partners perform as a heterosexual couple, taking on male and female gender roles. *The Song* therefore still promotes heteronormativity, seeking ways for queerness to be acceptable to heterosexual standards. Peele explains this reductive view of queerness, stating: "Representation that ask for acceptance only make the claim that there is nothing really wrong with queer culture, but they have nothing to say about the ways in which queer culture might offer powerful models of community."[105] In addition to this, *The Song* only allows a narrow, modern view of monogamous queerness. Although Homer himself never clarifies the nature of the men's connection and even points out the hetero relationships of both men with other women, he leaves room for interpretation. Contrastingly, Achilles and Patroclus are continuously criticised for having sexual tension with or interest in other female character in *The Song*. For instance, Briseis is saved by Patroclus and confesses her love to him, which he reciprocates to an extent since he brings up having children with her to Achilles.[106] Similarly, Achilles has a sexual relationship and son with Deidameia, causing Patroclus to become so jealous he sleeps with her too.[107] The characters are shamed and critiqued for their desires and experiences because they are supposed to be monogamously homosexual. Women are presented as some sort of challenge they must overcome, rather than part of an exploration of sexuality. This comes to a head when Pyrrhus, Achilles and Deidameia's son, is depicted as a final

[104] Miller, *The Song of Achilles*, 240.

[105] Peele, introduction to *Queer Popular Culture*, 2.

[106] Miller, *The Song of Achilles*, 255.

[107] Miller, 137.

punishment for Achilles' infidelity when he prevents the couple from being together in the underworld: "[Patroclus] is a blot on my father's honour, and a blot on mine."[108] Once again, *The Song*'s narrative deconstruction and recontextualization of only part of the source text reaffirms heteronormativity, enforcing modern views on queer relationships through a heterosexual lens.

1.2.2 *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*

'Sleeping Beauty's' narrative, as analysed earlier, revolves around similar heteronormative gender roles. In addition to assigning clear dominant and subordinate characteristics to the characters individually, the fairytale also serves as a model to the ideal heterosexual relationship. While other, weaker or insignificant men bleed out on thorns, Rosamund's 'true love' meets no resistance as he wakes her with a kiss and marries her. However, the history of 'Sleeping Beauty' gives the ending of this story a repulsive connotation. In one of its earliest versions *Perceforest*, the princess is assaulted, wakes up with a child and then still happily marries the prince.[109] The version *Sun, Moon, and Talia* introduces the prince's other wife who attempts to kill the princess and her children, turning her into the villain to take blame away from the rapist.[110] Even without these elements, 'Sleeping Beauty's' ending evokes questions about consent, especially since this story is still widely told to children. Martha M. Johnson-Olin explores the influence of Disney movies on children's perspective of gender and fairytales, stating 'princess culture' seems to indoctrinate young girls and reinforce gender roles more than the original fairytales themselves.[111] Similarly, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*

[108] Miller, 347.

[109] Ashlimann, "Sleeping Beauty," University of Pittsburgh, revised 26 November 2023, https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/type0410.html.

[110] See note 109 above.

[111] Fabrizi, *Fantasy Literature: Challenging Genres*, 79-81.

amplifies heteronormative roles in the princess' relationships that 'Sleeping Beauty' barely hints at. First and foremost, the princess is continuously focused on how others can protect or save her. This largely dictates her romantic interests. She tells her childhood crush Laleh: "You were the only person who ever made me feel like I was the one worth protecting."[112] Similarly, she wonders about her future partner, the div Parvaneh: "Wasn't it possible, then, that a div might save her, as well?"[113] Her relationship with her first love interest, Azad, likewise reflects the ideal heteronormative couple as he saves her on multiple occasions from crowds, fainting, other men, and even kidnapping.[114] Azad even touches her skin and kisses her for the first time, which shakes Soroya: "There was only *touch*, so overwhelming that it was almost unbearable."[115] It should be added that he did not ask for consent either. These additions of Bashardoust amplify Soroya's role as helpless princess, in both hetero and homosexual relationships. However, Azad turns out to be the villain and vows to take the throne from Soroya's family. He even wishes for her to be his queen, which Soroya refuses. Ironically, she compares the twisted image of them with her own ideal couple, her brother and childhood crush Laleh.[116] Moreover, despite Soroya's regular questioning whether she and the Shahmar belong together, her love story with Parvanah progresses. They too take on the hero and saviour trope, with Parvaneh constantly coming to Soroya's rescue and being the confident, strong counterpart to the helpless princess.[117] In a way, Parvaneh starts to mirror Azad. They both must take the role of the protector in Soroya's life, telling her to embrace

[112] Bashardoust, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*, 19.

[113] Bashardoust, 21.

[114] Bashardoust, 35; 79.

[115] Bashardoust, 124.

[116] Bashardoust, 224.

[117] Bashardoust, 179; 283.

her power while simultaneously lying for their own benefit. Even Soroya admits not knowing the difference, viewing herself in the same light: "She and Parvaneh and Azad – their choices, their mistakes, their ambitions – were all intertwined, inseparable from each other."[118] Although 'Sleeping Beauty' presents a typical heteronormative relationship, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn* intensifies the gender roles within Soroya's romantic experiences. In an attempt to free the princess, Bashardoust mostly reaffirms her protagonist's need for a dominant partner reflecting Rosamund's prince.

1.2.3 *She Who Became the Sun*

As discussed earlier, history is a narrative itself that presents a partial perspective on 'the real'. Sanders points out that historians assess documents and traces, overlooking "lost voices" that have been reduced or deprived by illiteracy, poverty, or simply a lack of power.[119] In a world with heteronormative standards, the voices of women, gender-nonconforming and queer people historically often only come to light through relationships with powerful individuals. Empress Ma, for instance, was born into a wealthy family and arranged to marry Zhu Yuanzhang by her adoptive father Guo Zixing. In her biography in the Mingshi, the official recording of the Ming dynasty, she advises the emperor against rash killing or punishments, contrasting her husband's violent reputation with compassion.[120] While her husband went to battle she stayed at home to comfort families of soldiers, "personally made clothing and shoes for the soldiers" and even remained generous to the emperor's consorts.[121] When the empress passed away, the emperor "wept inconsolably" and

[118] Bashardoust, 220.

[119] Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 181.

[120] Zhang Tingyu et al, trans. Ellen Soulliere, "Empresses of the Ming Dynasty: 1368-1462, from the History of the Ming Dynasty," *Renditions*, no. 85 (spring 2016): 29-32. https://rct.cuhk.edu.hk/renditions/publications/renditions-journal/no-85-toc/

[121] Tingyu et al, 29-33.

named no new empress.[122] Despite being a biography, even this text shows history is partial to whoever recorded it. According to Ellen Soulliere, the emperor and empress of the Ming dynasty that Zhu founded were the symbolic father and mother of the empire.[123] The narrative thus attempts to portray the royal couple as ideal and loving to show the success of their empire and power of their lineage. Parker-Chan uses this recorded information about their lives to shape *She Who Became the Sun*'s characters Zhu and Ma. Despite their essentially queer relationship, they take on heterosexual roles. Ma is betrothed to Guo Zixing's son rather than being adopted, and is characterised as a dutiful fiancé despite not loving her betrothed: "Perhaps because Ma had been given into the keeping of the Gao household too many years ago, her relationship to Little Guo was less like an engagement and more like the hostile interactions between siblings of different wives."[124] Similarly, she initially shows no attraction to Zhu but instead pities the bold monk.[125] Ma's empathy is what contrasts their characters. Zhu grows more determined to achieve greatness no matter the cost and only Ma's kindness makes her pause: "Zhu realised she wanted to keep that fierce empathy in the world. Not because she understood it, but because she didn't, and for that reason it seemed precious. *Something worth protecting*."[126] Similar to the real figures, they take on the roles of the violent protector and empathic caretaker of typical heterosexual relationships. However, the other queer relationship in Parker-Chan's novel shows a considerably worse queer representation. Ouyang and Lord Esen-Temur, who are effectively slave and owner, have an incredibly toxic relationship with emotional manipulation and a large power gap at its core.

[122] Tingyu et al, 34.

[123] Ellen Soulliere, "Women in the Imperial Household at the Close of China's Ming Dynasty: 1573-1644," in Asia Pacific Perspectives 12, no. 1 (2014): 33.

[124] Parker-Chan, *She Who Became the Sun*, 95.

[125] Parker-Chan, 99.

[126] Parker-Chan, 237.

Despite being indirectly responsible for the death of Ouyang's family and his mutilation, Esen is ignorant of his suffering, even flaunting his familial life and wives in front of Ouyang.[127] The eunuch, on the other hand, keeps his emotions hidden until he betrays Esen: "Do you think for a moment I *forgot*? Did you think I wasn't even man enough to care? Think me a coward who would dishonor my family and ancestors for the sake of staying alive like *this*?"[128] Ouyang once again contrasts Esen's desirable masculinity to his own unwanted femininity as a reason why they can never be together. In both of these relationships typically masculine and feminine qualities are opposed to either explain the characters compatibility or their toxicity. While *She Who Became the Sun* highlights the voices of those historically overlooked, their positions in relationships fit heteronormative standards.

1.2.4 *The Priory of the Orange Tree*

Lastly, *The Priory of the Orange Tree*'s narrative relies heavily on similar heteronormative and queer tropes. Sanders argues fairy tales are essentially variations on narrative types, which is one of the reasons they are endlessly adaptable.[129] She further notes that many protagonists of these stories are between innocent childhood and experienced adulthood, symbolising growing up.[130] Similar to 'Sleeping Beauty', the narrative of Saint George and Cleodolinda is a heteronormative trope in which girls passively wait for a hero to rescue, often with marriage to represent adulthood. Even in a later version for children, George is the one to take action, courageously rushing into combat to defeat the dragon, while Cleodolinda cowers on the ground: "'Fly, I beseech you, brave knight,' cried the fair girl trembling,

[127] Parker-Chan, 164.

[128] Parker-Chan, 391.

[129] Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 106.

[130] Sanders, 110.

'Leave me here to die.'"[131] Like Rosamund, Cleodolinda is often portrayed as a bride, even wearing a dress in 'The Golden Legend' as her father laments never having seen her marry.[132] As George continues his Christian heroics, Cleodolinda is never seen again. *The Priory of the Orange Tree* presents the legend of Sir Galian in the same way. Galian becomes the Saint and Saviour who starts a religion and kingdom, with Cleolind as his Maiden and wife. This founding myth dominates how the protagonists' relationships are categorised. First of all, Ead falls in love with Queen Sabran during her undercover mission. The many times Ead saves Sabran, including when she uses her magic to protect an oblivious Sabran from a dragon, reflects the version of Galian and Cleolind the reader is initially presented with. Additionally, Ead hides both her identity and knowledge from Sabran throughout the novel, making the queen appear vain and foolish. Sabran's only value seems to be in her duty to carry a child in her womb after she marries a prince, seemingly putting her and Ead's budding relationship on hold – until both her husband and unborn child are killed. Sabran then learns from Ead that Cleolind defeated the Nameless One and had no part in her bloodline with Galian. She realises she is mostly an instrument, even to Ead: "Nothing in my life was real. […] But you, Ead – I believed you were different."[133] Furthermore, the other queer relationship in the novel symbolises a different type of growing up, but falls back on heteronormative tropes of love nonetheless. Niclays' behaviour as a grumpy elderly man falls into place when it is revealed that he lost his lover Jannart to a plague. *The Priory* emphasises their relationship as a secret, seeing as Jannart was a rich duke with a wife. In a kingdom built on the myth of a knight and princess, he had no choice but to marry: "Most of his life had been a performance. […] *It is*

[131] Hamilton Wright Mabie, "Saint George and the Dragon," *Short Édition*, 10 August 2018, https://short-edition.com/en/classic/story/hamilton-wright-mabie/saint-george-and-the-dragon.

[132] Ashliman, "The Legend of Saint George," University of Pittsburg, revised 7 October 2024, https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/stgeorge1.html.

[133] Shannon, *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, 560.

not her fault my heart belongs to you, Jannart had told him once, and he had spoken true."[134] This representation of queer relationships as secret and harmful is reminiscent of Peele's argument of queerness as only acceptable when adjusted to heteronormative standards. Furthermore, even the unhappy ending of both couples is stereotypical of queer stories. Sabran and Ead must both first lead the kingdom and the Priory, but promise to find each other in a decade. On the other hand, Niclays and Jannart were always doomed lovers and after repeatedly flirting with death, Niclays eventually decides to live his remaining life in honour of Jannart. Nevertheless, he grows old alone. Both relationships are thus bound by the heteronormative roles and expectations of Galian and Cleolind's tale, but also by stereotypical bad endings for queer couples.

To sum up, the relationships in these rewritings display inherent assumptions about gender and sexuality. *The Song of Achilles* enforces modern views of monogamy and heterosexuality, and like *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*'s knight-saves-princess narrative maintains original gender roles to reaffirm heteronormative standards. Both *She Who Became the Sun* and *The Priory of the Orange Tree* attempt to uplift overlooked voices, yet fall back on conforming to gendered roles and suppression. Deconstructing dominant narratives has thus in different ways resulted in heteronormativity seeping into the relationship of the rewriting.

1.3 Environment and worldbuilding

The previously analysed protagonists and their relationships all exist in a narrative context, which is especially significant as part of the fantasy genre. As previously explained fantasy literature asks important questions in life but sets its narrative in an impossible, foreign world

[134] Shannon, 146.

which forces the reader to interact closely with the text.[135] The fictional environment and world dictate the norm characters in the novel must comply to, especially when it comes to heteronormativity. Therefore, returning themes and values reveal heteronormative elements that form the foundation of these in these rewritings and their sources.

1.3.1 *The Song of Achilles*

First of all, the themes and treatment of women and queerness in *The Song of Achilles* frame their role and value within the perceived norm. As described earlier, Achilles' character in the *Iliad* revolves around power and violence. These themes go hand in hand with the desire for glory and honour. Men must create a reputation for themselves in battle or through the gods, but can also dishonour each other. They do so repeatedly, for instance when Agamemnon takes Briseis, who Achilles had claimed: "The girls the sons of the Achaians chose out for my honour, and I won her with my own spear, and stormed a strong-fenced city, is taken back out of my hands by powerful Agamemnon, the son of Atreus, as if I were some dishonoured vagabond."[136] Women are usually either trophies for the victor or causes of conflict, being treated as objects that amplify or reduce honour. Additionally, any relationships serve to continue a lineage. Characters are introduced by the names of their fathers, and some soldiers gain more renown because they are half-gods. In *The Song of Achilles*, these values and themes are nearly identical. In part, this is due to the constant reference to Greek myths specifically well-known to audiences, such as Heracles, Perseus, or Theseus.[137] Themes of honour and power, which revolve around heteronormativity, fit what audiences remember of these heroes: their legacies through battles with the hydra, Medusa, or the minotaur. Unlike

[135] Fabrizi, *Fantasy Literature: Challenging Genres*, 2; James and Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, 1.

[136] Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer*, 331.

[137] Miller, *The Song of Achilles*, 98.

the *Iliad*, *The Song* reveals early on that Achilles will be the best warrior of his generation.[138] Despite learning it will lead to his death, Achilles' desire for glory continues: "My life is my reputation, […]. It is all I have. I will not live much longer. Memory is all I can hope for."[139] After his death only Patroclus, who desires no glory, criticises this and remembers him for who he truly was: "Look at how he will be remembered now. Killing Hector, killing Troilus. For things he did cruelly in his grief. […] But how is there glory in taking a life?"[140] Similar to the *Iliad*, *The Song* portrays women as mostly passive, but takes it a step further and places those that are not in a bad light. Although female characters get more dialogue, they are stereotypically portrayed as either love interests or villains. Briseis is once again reduced to a mark of honour as a prize to Achilles, but also a wife to Patroclus, who mostly ignores her confession of love and instead imagines using her as a surrogate mother, objectifying her: "She had offered me all of it, herself and the child and Achilles too."[141] On the other hand, powerful, outspoken women like Deidameia and Thetis are depicted as vain and manipulative. Information that might explain their behaviour, like Thetis' marriage to her abuser who assaulted her until she had Achilles and left him, is glossed over.[142] This representation of women as either passive or evil emphasises the dominant male perspective. Last but not least, queerness is barely represented in the world of *The Song.* Not only are Patroclus and Achilles the only queer couple mentioned, but they also show shame around the topic and fear being 'discovered', implying homosexuality is forbidden or bad. For instance,

[138] Miller, 36.

[139] Miller, 280.

[140] Miller, 239.

[141] Miller, 254.

[142] Alicja Zelazko, "Thetis," Britannica, updated 22 January 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Thetis.

when Odysseus asks if they share a bed, they get defensive and angry at the suggestion.[143] When Odysseus later mentions their relationship to Achilles' son, he reacts repulsed and simply answers: "My father had no such wife."[144] Evidently, queerness is treated as abnormal and taboo. Because of this, the characters are framed in an environment that remembers and assumes heteronormativity in myths and highlights sexist views and homophobia, resulting in their queerness and non-heteronormativity being seen as strange and unacceptable rather than desirable and empowering.

1.3.2 *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*

Rather than focusing on the legacy and power of men, 'Sleeping Beauty' and *Girl, Serpent, Thorn* discuss the relation women have to power. Although especially 'Sleeping Beauty's' earlier versions contain violence, the narrative highlights a message of true love. As previously discussed, the gender of the protagonists dictates their agency and activeness in the narrative. Rosamond has very little space to claim power and must wait for her true love. This relationship, once again, promotes a heteronormativity that assumes women's subordination. Moreover, the narrative's main theme is good prevailing over evil. Not only is the sleeping curse always undone, in earlier versions like *Sun, Moon, and Talia*, this evil also takes on the role of other women, like the first queen of the prince.[145] Remarkably, the prince who assaults the princess is always celebrated. Consequently, this text creates a clear division of power between genders that is based on true love and partial morality. Contrastingly, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn* never mentions the idea of true love. Nevertheless, the novel is framed like a fairy tale through its prologue: "Stories always begin the same way: *There was and there was*

[143] Miller, 165.

[144] Miller, 347-8.

[145] Ashlimann, "Sleeping Beauty," University of Pittsburgh, revised 26 November 2023, https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/type0410.html.

not. […] When the daughter sits at her mother's feet and asks her for the story – the same story – her favourite part is hearing those words, because it means anything is possible."[146] In contrast to the well-known 'once upon a time', which could be anywhere and anytime, Bashardoust places the emphasis on the cultural and historical Persian background through locations in the subsequent story. Additionally, she reveals the most prominent characters as a cursed girl and her mother, highlighting the importance of their connection. Nevertheless, this narrative framing falls apart as soon as the reader learns the mother caused the curse. Like *Sun, Moon, and Talia*, the novel focuses on conflicts between female characters. Soroya, her mother, and later Parvaneh, manipulate and lie to each other, while other female characters like Laleh or Parvaneh's sisters have little power. Until Azad, the true villain of the story, physically turns into a monster, Soroya is prepared to sacrifice her entire country to break her own curse: "If she put out the Royal Fire, it would be an act of pure selfishness, designed to benefit herself and no one else. And just his once, she wanted to be selfish."[147] This directly plays into another theme of the story: self-acceptance. Soroya considers herself a monster, which is framed as the opposite of a princess. While the female royals like Laleh are presumed helpless, the monstrous female divs are powerful and motivate her to follow her impulses: "*Be* angry. Be violent. But not for his sake. Not to do as he commands. Be angry for yourself. Use that rage to fight him."[148] This opposition comes to a head when Soroya must choose between being human or monster. She transforms into a briar-like creature and starts a relationship with Parvaneh, no longer fitting into the role of a princess.[149] Finally, Soroya and Parvaneh's relationship is the only queer one described in the entire story. Given

[146] Bashardoust, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*, 1.

[147] Bashardoust, 123.

[148] Bashardoust, 249.

[149] Bashardoust, 307.

that there is no comparison or representation of other queerness, their relationship and characterisation as the opposite of royal turns Soroya into a monstrous, twisted entity. The couple must leave the humans to live 'happily ever after', suggesting that queerness or powerful women cannot be part of the 'normal' world. The protagonist's self-image and the role of her and her queerness are thus explained by how women and queerness are framed in the broader narrative and environment of the novel and its source, which exclude and villainise powerful women.

1.3.3 *She Who Became the Sun*

On the other hand, Parker-Chan's novel must fall back on the historical background of fourteenth century China and is inspired by the environment of the real Emperor in order to sketch the character of Zhu. In this era most thrones, influential positions, and educational resources were held by men. As analysed earlier, the partial perspective of historical texts was provided by those with power, meaning that even imperial biographies promoted idealised versions of the truth. Seeing as the emperor Zhu continuously fought for his position and reputation, it is unsurprising that power and strength have a prominent role in the narratives about his life.[150] Much like the *Iliad*, stories about Zhu and Chinese history therefore focus on lineage and succession. Soulliere explains that many emperors at the time replaced the empress with consorts to "provide the strongest possible guarantee of a legitimate male heir to inherit and carry on the sacrifices to the ancestors in each generation."[151] Women, he adds, had detailed prescriptions of duties and could be elevated to high positions by powerful men, but just as easily be stripped of titles or replaced by eunuchs in administrative or advising

[150] Chan, "Hongwu," Britannica, updated 25 November 2024, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hongwu.

[151] Soulliere, "Women in the Imperial Household at the Close of China's Ming Dynasty: 1573-1644," 34-36.

roles.[152] As such, historical narratives about Zhu focus on monogamy to ensure a succession, as well as the narrow roles of women and eunuchs. *She Who Became the Sun*'s narrative highlights the same values of fourteenth century China, yet emphasises the powerlessness of women and exclusion of queerness. Parker-Chan immediately makes it clear that girls are seen as secondary to boys by describing the famine in Zhu's town: "If a family had a son and a daughter and two bites of food, who would waste one on a daughter?"[153] This is directly connected to Zhu's stolen destiny as a girl. Zhu, however, desires greatness at any cost, wanting glory for herself rather than a lineage: "Remember me, and say my name for ten thousand years."[154] Other women in the novel require Zhu's motivation to realise their own desires, like Ma or Lady Rui, whom Zhu helps understand womanhood *is* power and take over the city her deceased husband ruled.[155] Finally, not conforming to heteronormativity and gender roles is portrayed as disgraceful or entirely avoided. Despite eunuchs being common and valued servants in ancient China, Ouyang, the only eunuch in *She Who Became the Sun*, is hated and seen as impure. Being a non-conforming person is thus made into a punishment. Similarly, queerness is portrayed as disgraceful to Mongols like Esen's brother, who states: "The only thing I could do to make myself less like the son he wants is to take a beautiful male lover, and have the entire palace know he takes me nightly."[156] Outside of this, queerness is never discussed – not even between Zhu and Ma. Nevertheless, Parker-Chan continuously compares queer characters, highlighting Zhu and Ouyang's connection simply because they both stand out:

[152] Soulliere, 36-40.

[153] Parker-Chan, *She Who Became the Sun*, 12.

[154] Parker-Chan, 409.

[155] Parker-Chan, 178-183.

[156] Parker-Chan, 136.

> As she stared at the eunuch standing there amidst his ghosts, she suddenly felt the half-forgotten twang of a string plucked deep within her. *Like connecting to like*. A searing awareness of her difference from the person she was supposed to be shot through her. But even as she recoiled in the rejection of that connection, she felt understanding flowing through it. *Like knows like*.[157]

Zhu recognises herself in him, fitting neither femininity nor masculinity, and even eventually describes herself as being in the same "category" as Ouyang.[158] In Zhu's environment, Ouyang is the only representation of a non-binary identity. This directly contrasts Ouyang's own aversion to his femininity and non-conformity.[159] This way, the novel attempts to move away from heteronormativity but heavily relies on Zhu to empower femininity and non-conformity in an unaccepting world.

1.3.4 *The Priory of the Orange Tree*

Last of all, *The Priory of the Orange Tree* shows that all narratives are partial and power controls which perspective is told. A recurring theme in 'Saint George and the Dragon' is religion, since the story is framed as the journey of a knight errant, a medieval knight travelling to find adventure. George spoke out for persecuted Christians and tried to convince others to join his religion, even when he is taken to prison, tortured, and sees either angels or Jesus and then converts his capturers to Christianity.[160] As discussed previously, the Saint embodies the righteous hero who must save a princess. Rather than being motivated by

[157] Parker-Chan, 77.

[158] Parker-Chan, 275.

[159] Parker-Chan, 372.

[160] Mabie, "Saint George and the Dragon," *Short Édition*, 10 August 2018, https://short-edition.com/en/classic/story/hamilton-wright-mabie/saint-george-and-the-dragon; Ashliman, "The Legend of Saint George," University of Pittsburg, revised 7 October 2024, https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/stgeorge1.html.

marriage, however, his goal is to defend and spread Christianity. The other characters, including Cleodolinda, present a test of his faith or target of his conviction. Moreover, while the newer tale ends after George's beheading, *The Golden Legend* describes the Saint's help in sieges and healing wounds.[161] The tale concludes: "Let us pray unto him that he be special protector and defender of this realm," showing the running theme of legacy similar to the previously discussed tales of heroes.[162] *The Priory of the Orange Tree* instead emphasises the fact that stories and faiths, even George's, are all partial. The novel introduces Saint Galian's perspective as the truth, showing how the loudest, more powerful voice decides what history is. A religion, nation, and generations of people follow an invented heteronormative narrative without question. Other characters like Sabran hardly waver in their faith, and when Ead even suggests Cleolind refused to marry Galian, she is harshly interrupted: "You do have the tongue of a storyteller – but I suspect you have heard too many stories, and not quite enough truth."[163] As a descendant of Galian, Sabran herself is seen as holy and often reminds others her word is holy. Unfortunately, those around her view the crown as something related to her body rather than her mind. Since it is widely believed the Nameless One will only return once her bloodline ends, Sabran is forced to marry and reproduce against her will:

> […] when he was inside me, even when I found pleasure in it, it felt-' She closed her eyes. 'It felt as if my body were not wholly my own. It… still feels that way now. […] Yet if I refrain, the world will stand in judgement. Too proud to wed my country to

[161] Ashliman, "The Legend of Saint George," University of Pittsburg, revised 7 October 2024, https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/stgeorge1.html.

[162] See note 161 above.

[163] Shannon, *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, 71.

another. Too selfish to give my daughter a father to love her if I should perish. This is how I will be seen. Who would rise in defence of such a monarch?[164]

Sabran's entire female bloodline was valued, crowned, and remembered only for their wombs. When Sabran loses her husband and child, she blames herself: "I will be the last Berethnet. I am the destroyer of my house."[165] This contrast between the unwavering faith in the self-proclaimed Saint Galian and restrictive pressure on the queens who followed him highlights the dominant heteronormative roles in *The Priory*'s world. Finally, only when Sabran can no longer serve her country as a mother do she and Ead get together. Although there is no commentary on the queer nature of their relationship, Ead gets banished for their sexual relationship. Outside of Niclays' character there is little other discussion or representation of queerness. The model of Galian and Cleolind and the role of women that the novel's world follows strictly directly effects how relationships take shape. Once again, *The Priory* therefore depicts how even faith and legacy are influenced by the most powerful voice, setting the precedent for how characters are viewed and judged.

Altogether, heteronormativity from the source texts shapes these novel's worlds and norms, but is not always easily accepted by the characters. *The Song of Achilles* follows the *Iliad*'s themes of honour to form a sexist and homophobic environment that critiques the non-heteronormativity of its characters. While *Girl, Serpent, Thorn* presents a similar exclusion of queerness, it does so by presenting various forms of power and engages with its fairytale format. *The Priory of the Orange Tree* and *She Who Became the Sun* take this a step further, utilising their source texts to depict a heteronormative environment yet using their characters to actively question the dominant narratives.

[164] Shannon, 329-330.

[165] Shannon, 383.

1.4 Chapter conclusion

The way these narratives are shaped within a world that is based on existing texts directly affects the characters' roles and perceived norm and representation within the story. As previously explained, Plummer states that narratives can provide empowerment to emancipate and give us hope, but also dominate and regulate us.[166] In a world where heteronormative narratives define the standard, both stories of the past and the present contain elements that conform to this standard. However, the novels utilise this heteronormative foundation in various ways. *The Song of Achilles* places its protagonists in an environment that revolves around hetero-masculine norms, yet combines historical sexism and homophobia with modern stereotypes of monogamous heterosexuality and masculinity. *Girl, Serpent, Thorn* reveals the other side of the heteronormative coin, namely desired passivity in women and demonisation of those who do gain power. Although both novels end up excluding their own characters, as well as queerness itself, only Bashardoust's novel shows an alternative to its heteronormativity through the protagonists' choice to join the monsters. Contrastingly, *She Who Became the Sun* and *The Priory of the Orange Tree* utilise their source narratives to emphasise the standard of heteronormativity and imbalance of power that, as Plummer describes, dominates and regulates us. Zhu's character and her queerness represent non-conformity, yet exist within a historical narrative that limits women and critiques not fitting the heteronormative standard. Likewise, *Priory* illustrates how one heteronormative, male-centred narrative of the past can dominate and regulate all others in the present. Despite being inherently queer, the texts cannot escape heteronormative assumptions and standards. In deconstructing their source texts, these rewritings replicate the heteronormative environment and norms and hold, intentionally or not, their protagonists and their queer relationships to the standards they set. In some instances the rewriting even

[166] Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 22.

reveals a projection of modern, usually Western views of queerness and femininity. In others, the heteronormative foundation of their sources simply serves as a contrast to dominant narratives and underlines power and nonconformity of its characters. As such, the partial deconstruction of the narratives of the novel's source texts in combination with newly invented narrative elements bring about a queer story that is, nevertheless, in some way rooted in heteronormativity.

Chapter 2: Queer representation

In deconstructing existing narratives for a new goal, rewritings must also rebuild what they have taken apart. Rebuilding a narrative takes work, especially if the author wants to achieve what an interview with Samantha Shannon calls a "renaissance" of feminist fantasy retellings. Moving away from heteronormativity, misogyny, or homophobia can be more than just overcoming patriarchy, especially in an inherently subversive genre like fantasy. The author of *The Priory of the Orange Tree* explains: "It can be empowering to see women overcoming extreme patriarchy. […] fantasy is the genre where we can dream beyond that. I think it can also be powerful to show a world where there is no sexism."[167] Fantasy can thus rebuild existing narratives to form whatever the creator wants, limitless and all-encompassing. For Shannon and the other authors discussed here, this means creating a place for queerness as well. The goal of this chapter is to analyse the representation of queer gender and sexuality through the protagonists and their relationships with other characters. Through this, the second sub-question will be addressed: how do these rewritings rebuild existing narratives to include representation of gender and sexuality that question dominant narratives of power? This analysis will provide a clearer image of how these novels queer their narratives and critique or challenge the previously described heteronormative narratives of their source texts.

2.1 Protagonists

When a novel aims to challenge a set norm, the protagonist is a crucial tool in representing this defiance through their desires, actions, and beliefs. In rewritings, any changes to memorable characters are easily noticeable and can reveal the author's intentions. According

[167] Katie Fraser, "Samantha Shannon on her Roots of Chaos Cycle, her love of dragons and powerful characters," The Bookseller, 4 November 2022, https://www.thebookseller.com/author-interviews/samantha-shannon-on-her-roots-of-chaos-cycle-her-love-of-dragons-and-powerful-characters.

to Robbins and Whitley, queer literary theory itself is about disrupting the norm and challenging the familiar.[168] As analysed earlier, minorities were largely overlooked by dominant voices in history and literature, shaping this norm of familiarity. Nevertheless, genres like fantasy allow authors and readers alike to (re)imagine new or existing worlds and create a space where marginalised people can be safely represented.[169] Queerness, both in fantasy and sexuality, thus challenges conventions.[170] The protagonists of such texts can reveal much about the author and their intentions, especially with regards to ideas on normative identities.

2.1.1 *The Song of Achilles*

First of all, *The Song of Achilles* utilises its source text to challenge dominant historical views that exclude queer views and represents the queer struggle to find a voice and belong. As explained earlier, Haneş states rewritings can change or reassert identities by bringing their source texts to the present, and especially Homeric rewritings use a process of deheroisation and demythologisation to connect its themes to the contemporary reality. [171] Likewise, Miller recreates the world of ancient Greece in much detail. Yet the narrative elements that deify characters are adjusted, partly through the perspective shift. Rather than the broader narrative focused on Achilles it shows the narrow, unreliable view of Patroclus who has a minor role in the *Iliad*. Miller entirely shifts the focus of the narrative, as well as the myth of Achilles himself. According to the unfinished epic *Achilleid* by Statius, the goddess Thetis dipped him

[168] James and Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, 96.

[169] James Mendlesohn, 58.

[170] McGillis, "A Fairytale Is Just Fairytale: George MacDonald and the Queering of Fairy," 89-98; English, "Fantasy," in *Lesbian Modernism: Censorship, Sexuality and Genre Fiction*, 28-38.

[171] Haneş, "Margaret Atwood: The Penelopiad – Rewriting in Postmodern Feminine Literature," 10.

in the river Styx, making him invulnerable except for one heel.[172] The book, clearly self-aware, even pokes fun at different versions of Achilles' own myth: "Paris nocks his arrow. 'Where do I aim? I heard he was invulnerable. Except for-' 'He is a man,' Apollo says. 'Not a god. Shoot him and he will die.'"[173] Moreover, *The Song* does not characterise Achilles by his rage, as Homer does, but argues his love and grief for Patroclus resulted in his death.[174] In her defiance of the original myth, Miller moves the narrative to the present to make space for a nonconforming narrative within history and classical literature, but also emphasises the character's humanity. The progression of the story and Patroclus' character connect this humanity to Patroclus' identity and the queer desire to find oneself and belong somewhere. From the very start of the novel it is implied Patroclus is unlike others and is easily ignored, both at home and after his exile.[175] Patroclus' negative self-image is crucial in this. He sees himself as subordinate to others and assumes they have negative opinions about him: "I could hear the thoughts of the staring boys as if they said them. *Why him?* […] the most unlikely of us, small and ungrateful and probably cursed."[176] Likewise, he excludes himself from the other soldiers in the battle of Troy. While Achilles' presence is celebrated, he keeps to himself.[177] Patroclus later argues: "I was not a prince, with honour at stake. I was not a soldier, bound to obedience, or a hero whose skill would be missed. I was an exile, a man with no status or rank. If Achilles saw fit to leave me behind, that was his business alone."[178]

[172] Statius, "Achilleid 1," Theoi Project – Classical Texts Library, accessed 23 December 2024, https://www.theoi.com/Text/StatiusAchilleid1A.html.

[173] Miller, *The Song of Achilles*, 336.

[174] Miller, 330-37.

[175] Miller, 23.

[176] Miller, 37.

[177] Miller, 175.

[178] Miller, 228.

Patroclus is excluded and easily overlooked, much like his original role in the *Iliad*. This reflects real-life issues of queer individuals who feel alienated and different, especially growing up. Historical and literary heroes are nothing like them, which Patroclus directly experiences. In "shaking the dust from [the canonical texts] covers and placing it in the universe of contemporary readings" as Haneş states, Miller brings the *Iliad*'s world to the present and gives it new meaning.[179] In fact, Patroclus eventually manages to find his voice and a sense of belonging. Despite the ongoing war, he creates a home with Achilles and Briseis too, who he considers "a member of our circle, for life."[180] Additionally, Patroclus finds his calling in healing and gains respect and a standing with the soldiers for his skills.[181] He outgrows his own insecurities and the expectations of others, becoming his own person with his own home. *The Song of Achilles* rebuilds the environment of the myth of Achilles in accordance with the source text for contemporary audiences in order to create space for different interpretations and representation. Patroclus' character progression symbolises the exclusion many queer people feel in their own lives, as well as a hope for inclusion and belonging.

2.1.2 *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*

In a similar way, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn* twists Sleeping Beauty to give the princess agency, addressing topics of self-acceptance and self-discovery while commenting on the influence of normative narratives. Lam argues that fairy-tale reimaginations aim to interrogate multiple viewpoints to disrupt social, historical, and cultural assumptions, deconstruct the power

[179] Haneş, "Margaret Atwood: The Penelopiad – Rewriting in Postmodern Feminine Literature," 10.

[180] Miller, *The Song of Achilles*, 238.

[181] Miller, 247.

dynamics and systems that shaped those assumptions, and take action to change them.[182] Similarly, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn* provides a space for overlooked minorities by switching the perspective and making Soroya the protagonist. Despite the title 'Little Briar Rose', the original tale and its curse render princess Rosamund powerless and largely voiceless. Contrastingly, Bashardoust empowers Soroya by giving her a physical ability to stand up to others. The narrative focuses on Soroya's journey as she navigates her own struggles and suffering, often self-inflicted, rather than being saved by a prince. This contrast to the original fairytale is emphasised in the epigraph, where Bashardoust quotes: "I am both the Sleeping Beauty and the enchanted castle; the princess drowses in the castle of her flesh."[183] Like Lam suggests, this change in perspective disrupts pre-existing assumptions of classic tales. However, the rewriting has to build this up. The protagonist is deeply influenced by dominant normative narratives herself, which is shown in the introduction and through Soroya's love for tales. For instance, the princess imagines a Rapunzel-like scenario, but believes no one would ever love her like that: "She had read enough stories to know that the princess and the monster were never the same. She had been alone long enough to know which one she was."[184] Soroya compares herself to these normative stories and is taught her otherness is unlovable. This convinces her to stay hidden despite her true desires.[185] Due to the queer elements of this novel, a comparison can be drawn with the internalised homophobia many queer individuals face. They are often taught certain dominant social values promoting homophobia and discrimination while growing up, which can stick with them despite their

[182] Ka Yan Lam, "Engaging with Critical Literacy through Restorying: A University Reading and Writing Workshop on Fairy-Tale Reimaginations," 220-21.

[183] Bashardoust, epigraph; Angela Carter, "Vampirella," BBC Radio 4 Extra, 15 December 2024, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06tfv03.

[184] Bashardoust, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*, 16.

[185] Bashardoust, 7.

own beliefs or identity. Because of this, many queer people have a negative self-image or are afraid to be themselves. In a similar way, Soroya continuously describes living between two worlds of shadow and light, one where her monstrous self is accepted and one where she must hide.[186] She villainises herself and compares herself to those that do fit in: "Laleh belonged to the same world as Sorush – a world of light, not shadow. Of open air, not narrow, hidden passageways."[187] An emphasis is placed on Soroya's role as a princess who is part of a social structure and rulers of a country. However, her knowledge of the palace's hidden passageways is also the reason she can escape the Shahmar's imprisonment.[188] As the story progresses, Soroya's darkness therefore turns into something powerful. This comes to a head when she transforms into a monster, no longer fighting her dark side and saving her country and its ruler.[189] The novel struggles with showing a true self-acceptance and instead emphasises female rage and coming out of hiding. Soroya's character, and thus her queerness, is a constant comparison between princess and monster. This is once again prefaced in the novel's dedication, where Bashardoust addresses readers struggling with self-image and self-understanding: "To anyone who has ever felt poisonous or monstrous or bristling with thorns."[190] *Girl, Serpent, Thorn* challenges the norm by giving the princess a voice and power to critique the negative influence of dominant narratives and systems, but also sheds light on internalised homophobia and the negative self-image of queer individuals. Soroya voices a

[186] Bashardoust, 32; 83.

[187] Bashardoust, 13.

[188] Bashardoust, 147.

[189] Bashardoust, 297.

[190] Bashardoust, dedication.

question many queer individuals ask themselves: "what kind of person would I be if I hadn't grown up hidden and ashamed?"[191]

2.1.3 *She Who Became the Sun*

On the other hand, the story of Zhu highlights the struggle of self-identification and understanding. Sanders explains that history can be redeployed to "indicate those communities whose histories have not been told before," thus retrieving "lost voices or lost histories."[192] In a way, Parker-Chan rewrites history in *She Who Became the Sun* by shifting Zhu's gender and reimagining their life. Although they state in their historical note that "the story takes liberties with nearly everything – much like the wildly addictive Chinese costume dramas upon which it was based," the history of the Chinese Yuan dynasty and its social structure is elaborately laid out.[193] Along with the map of east China, near current-day Shanghai, and parts and chapters divided in time periods and locations, the novel is framed in a historical context.[194] The rewriting therefore challenges the way history is viewed, making it just another possible and partial, personal narrative of the past. When Zhu initially takes on the identity of her brother it is described as straightforward and simple: "And the boy who had been Zhu family's second daughter said, clearly enough for Heaven to hear, "My name is Zhu Chonbga."[195] She keeps her female pronouns but is continuously shown struggling with gender binaries. As previously explored, the only non-binary representation for Zhu are eunuchs. Their nonconformity is initially seen as off-putting: "[…] she wasn't made of the

[191] Bashardoust, 109.

[192] Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 170.

[193] Parker-Chan, *She Who Became the Sun*, 7-8.

[194] Parker-Chan, 6.

[195] Parker-Chan, 29.

same pure male substance as Zhu Chongba. She had a different substance. *A different fate*."[196] As the novel progresses, this perspective changes. She starts to become Zhu and favour her male side. Eventually she reacts violently and insulted to accusations of being female, and Ma even describes Zhu's reaction to her own naked body as "baring a mortal wound they dared not to look at themselves."[197] Zhu's internalised homophobia or sexism associate being female to being nothing, and being male to a gender performance as Zhu Chongba. The aversion to her own femininity, however, eventually turns into a form of acceptance and discovery. The protagonist reflects on her revulsion of her body, which she believes hosts neither a man, a woman, or Zhu Chongba: "*I'm me*, she thought wonderingly. *But who am I?*"[198] This realisation is at the heart of *She Who Became the Sun*. Zhu only gains the power she needs to achieve greatness by accepting herself and her unique substance:

> She dived deep into the mutilated body that wasn't Zhu Chongba's body, but a different person's body – a different substance entirely. She had always done this looking for something that felt *foreign* – for that seed of greatness that had been transplanted into her under the false understanding that she was someone else. But now when she looked, she saw what had been there all along. Not the red spark of the old Song emperors, but her own determination – her desire.[199]

Zhu's experience is directly contrasted by Ouyang's view of nonconformity. As previously explained, the eunuch is deeply sexist and hateful of his own body. He compares

[196] Parker-Chan, 52.

[197] Parker-Chan, 183; 254.

[198] Parker-Chan, 341.

[199] Parker-Chan, 338.

himself to Esen and resents him for the perfection and "wholeness" Ouyang himself lacks.[200] Through Ouyang's characterisation, the novel portrays the negative impact of heteronormativity, even on individuals who do not directly identify as queer. While Zhu manages to overcome her hate and exclusion, Ouyang gets stuck in his. This is magnified in their final confrontation, after Ouyang has mutilated Zhu.[201] Unlike the eunuch, the physical change has changed Zhu for the better: ""You didn't nearly kill me," Zhu corrected. "You freed me.""[202] Most importantly, despite these contrasting depictions of queerness, they are both represented honestly and clearly. Parker-Chan retrieves both of their voices and histories, not hesitating to show how a heteronormative environment shapes different experiences and identities. *She Who Became the Sun* portrays Zhu and Ouyang's identity struggles and challenges the exclusion of minorities and the dominance of heteronormativity in historical narratives by framing the queer narrative in history.

2.1.4 *The Priory of the Orange Tree*

Through the combination of a multitude of representations, *The Priory of the Orange Tree* paints a realistic and ordinary picture of not just the experiences and emotions of queer people, but also the world's diversity. As pointed out earlier, Sanders states mythical literature has been appropriated throughout history, similar to what contemporary authors are attempting with rewritings.[203] Narratives evolve, history is expanded on, and tales combine. In a similar way, Shannon's novel instantly makes its inspirations apparent, remarking: "None is intended as a faithful representation of any one country or culture at any point in

[200] Parker-Chan, 90-91.

[201] Parker-Chan, 314.

[202] Parker-Chan, 374.

[203] Leitch, *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, 34; Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 181.

history."[204] Additionally, each of its six parts introduced with a quote, intertwining the novel's fiction with reality. These reach from Satan in Revelation, a witch in Shakespeare, poems by Edmund Spencer and the Scottish Marion Angus, to lines from the Man'yōshū, the oldest existing Japanese poetry anthology, about blind conviction.[205] In blurring the line between narratives, truth, and fiction, the novel calls attention to what both Sanders and Leitch call "a history of textualities", in which facts and stories can be adapted and become a matter of interpretation.[206] In Shannon's version, these narratives are combined to highlight representation. There are four protagonists of all genders, races, and sexualities: Ead is a black or middle eastern queer woman, Niclays is a gay white man, and Tané and Loth are confirmed East-Asian and black but have no distinct sexualities. Because of this diversity and mix of stories and identities, the novel establishes no clear norm. Societal expectations in the novel revolve around status, religion, and legacy, emphasising the contrast of belief and truth. Most of all, *Priory* depicts queerness as normative, which is shown for instance through the deliberate genderless replacement 'companion' of wife or husband.[207] The lack of representation of queerness in history and literature often causes a focus on actively challenging normativity, but depicting an adjusted norm instead creates space to represent ordinary experiences or feelings of queer protagonists. In *Priory*, this is mostly belief and grief. For instance, Ead's personality revolves around her belief in the Mother and her magic from the Orange Tree. Initially, this empowers and differentiates her in Sabran's court. As previously pointed out, Ead looks down on followers of the 'Deceiver', partly because they

[204] Shannon, *The Priory of the Orange Tree*.

[205] Shannon, 1; 251; 405; 621.

[206] Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 189.

[207] Shannon, *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, 62.

outlaw other religions, and considers especially Sabran "arrogant and overindulged."[208] However, when she talks to the granddaughter of Jannart, who believes the true reason for the Nameless One's return is a comet off its course, Ead is faced with the fact that belief and truth can be personal: "'You *believe*,' Ead said, frustrated. 'As others believe in gods. Often with less proof,' Truyde pointed out."[209] As she grows closer to Sabran and learns that her own home refuses to protect people of other beliefs, Ead must question her own truth and accept different perspectives to join forces against the serpent. Truth being individual and unweighable, especially in stories, is at the core of Ead's character.[210] This once again relates to this history of textualities, making narratives ambiguous. In contrast to this emphasis on community, Niclays' character shows a personal but underrepresented image of queerness, namely of loss and grief. *Priory* takes the reader through Niclays' grieving process, showing both sides of his love for Jannart through rose-coloured flashbacks and his bitter, true reality. While the protagonist's stereotypical grumpy persona and his questionable actions can largely be explained by his loss, the narrative instead stresses self-reflection and hard work. In the end, Niclays realises he must look inwards to continue without his partner: "Jannart was my midnight sun,' he rasped. 'The light I have followed. […] the work lies in myself. I fell into shadow, and now I must rise, so I might be a better man.'"[211] Much like Ead, Niclays must embrace change and can no longer rely on his initial knowledge and beliefs. *Priory* thus underlines the normalisation of diversity and queerness in fact and fiction, but questions and breaks down truths and facts, especially of its protagonists: "The walls they had built to

[208] Shannon, 169.

[209] Shannon, 364-65.

[210] Shannon, 109.

[211] Shannon, 752-53.

protect their beliefs had crumbled at their feet, and Sabran had watched her faith begin to decay with them."[212]

In short, all of these novels contrast their source texts' heteronormativity through their protagonists to symbolise certain queer experiences within the real world. Patroclus embodies exclusion and belonging, just as Soroya does self-acceptance and discovery, alluding to an external and internal homophobia. Contrastingly, Zhu represents defining and finding your identity while Ead and Niclays depict individual diversity, truth, and grief. These protagonists thus reflect largely underrepresented queer experiences.

2.2 Relationships

Although the protagonists have an important role in setting the norm and representing queerness, many of their desires, actions, and beliefs only become apparent in their interaction with other characters. Especially queerness, which is often about attraction and love, can be represented in more depth in fictional relationships. This not only relates to romantic relationships, but also sexual ones. According to English, exploration of sexuality in fantasy has become more explicit recently since the genre is ideal for questioning the normalised view of our own reality.[213] The depiction of romantic and sexual queer relationships of protagonists sheds light on added elements of these novels that question normative narratives of sexuality and identity.

[212] Shannon, 722.

[213] English, "Fantasy," in *Lesbian Modernism: Censorship, Sexuality and Genre Fiction*, 29.

2.2.1 *The Song of Achilles*

In order to rewrite the popular myth of Patroclus and Achilles, *The Song of Achilles* frames their queer relationship within the context of their original myth and focuses on their private feelings and desires. As previously explained, there has been much discussion throughout history about the nature of Patroclus and Achilles' relationship, especially in regard to what was the norm in Ancient Greece. On the one hand, Szmigiero states "classics have been held hostage by conservatists," excluding minorities like queer people and their perspectives.[214] On the other hand, Miller's rewriting is not an entirely new view. In his *Symposium* Plato goes as far as to state that the two were divinely approved by the gods, who respect nothing more than love.[215] Instead of fully rewriting the myth, Miller builds on this existing perspective: "He is half my soul, as the poets say."[216] Since Homer did not clarify the nature of their companionship, this queer narrative is presented as a possibility. *The Song* does this not only by recreating the narrative context, but also by mimicking a poetical and lyrical language of classical texts. This is especially utilised in moments that contrast or seem unfitting of the classics, like explicit scenes between Patroclus and Achilles.

> He went still as I took him in my hand, soft as the delicate velvet of petals. I knew Achilles' golden skin and the curve of his neck, the crook of his elbows. I knew how pleasure looked on him. Our bodies cupped each other like hands. The blanket had twisted around me. He stripped them from us both. The air over my skin was a shock,

[214] Szmigiero, "Reflexivity and New Metanarratives: Contemporary English-language Retellings of Classical Mythology," 99.

[215] Plato, "Symposium," Perseus Digital Library, accessed 2 January 2025, https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper /text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0174%3 Atext%3DSym.%3A page%3D180.

[216] Miller, *The Song of Achilles*, 284.

and I shivered. He was outlined against the painted stars; Polaris sat on his shoulder.[217]

The scene repeatedly draws comparisons to describe bodies and sensations, yet never directly refers to body parts or sexual terms. Even in other non-sexual scenes like battle Miller uses terms like "shaft after shaft", twisting wrists, and thrusting to describe Achilles' actions.[218] Such scenes not only retain a mythical and classical element that dances around modern terms of intimacy and bodies, but also reiterate the normalcy of their desire and queerness; like the patterned stars or blood drawn in battle, they belong together. Subverting traditional narratives and offering new interpretations such as this one, Szmigiero explains, is the aim of many classical retellings and the advantage of the accessibility of genre fiction.[219] Unfortunately, the novel limits itself by focusing on this classical theme and barely discusses queerness or sexuality individually. There are no grand realisations of queerness or any discussions between the men about the nature of their relationship. Instead, it is described as natural to Patroclus to desire Achilles instead of women: "The feelings that stirred in me at night seemed strangely distant from those serving girls with their lowered eyes and obedience. […] I did not wish for such a thing."[220] Although their relationship is the heart of *The Song*, their queerness is not of much importance in the midst of a war involving gods and heroes. When Odysseus mentions their relationship, Patroclus explains that men liked conquest, not *being* conquered; yet this argument is never brought up by others.[221] Instead,

[217] Miller, 94.

[218] Miller, 227.

[219] Szmigiero, "Reflexivity and New Metanarratives: Contemporary English-language Retellings of Classical Mythology," 105.

[220] Miller, *The Song of Achilles*, 56.

[221] Miller, 166.

over time they are quietly accepted: "Our camp began to form a sort of family."[222] Despite not being represented in literature or historical records, this makes it feel as if queerness has always been part of history and classical narratives. *The Song of Achilles* therefore creates an image of Patroclus and Achilles' queer relationship that highlights destiny and desire, yet fits within the narrative context the *Iliad* has created.

2.2.2 *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*

On the other hand, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn* contrast the heteronormative standards its source text sets about relationships and identity by including queerness and subverting archetypes. As explained earlier, Lam argues fairy-tale reimaginations are acts of resistance that reshape narratives to represent silenced experiences and "reflect more diversifying perspectives in the society."[223] The 'Sleeping Beauty' rewriting does this by challenging the heteronormative elements of its previous, dominant narrative. To start, Soroya's relationship with Azad reflects the previously analysed heteronormative standard of the original Sleeping Beauty narrative, in which the stereotypical passive princess must be saved by the powerful prince. Initially, Azad fits his archetype and is understanding and accommodating. Yet he continuously crosses Soroya's boundaries and isolates Soroya to turn her against humans. In fact, Azad views his own humanity as a weakness, while as the Shahmar he has the power to dominate others.[224] Despite Soroya's best efforts to see Azad within the monster, she eventually realises his humanity is gone: "she wondered if he already considered himself dead, if he had died with the Shahmar, and no longer knew how to be just Azad."[225] This focus on manipulation and

[222] Miller, 237.

[223] Lam, "Engaging with Critical Literacy through Restorying: A University Reading and Writing Workshop on Fairy-Tale Reimaginations," 218.

[224] Bashardoust, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*, 212.

[225] Bashardoust, 300.

isolation is directly contrasted by the queer relationship Soroya has with Parvaneh. The two are initially distrustful of each other, once again characteristic of female characters in the original versions of 'Sleeping Beauty'. Nevertheless, the div encourages the princess to be herself, stealing one of the gloves that hides Soroya's bare skin.[226] Most of all, the two accept each other as they are: both monster and human. Soroya slowly starts understanding herself and her power, yet quickly turns self-destructive when she gives into her monstrous tendencies, for instance when she wrecks her own beloved garden:

> She knew she'd feel ashamed when she confronted the wreckage in the morning, but now – *now* – she felt nothing but the purest relief. She lost herself, and yet *was* herself, more than she had ever been before. She was breathless when it was done, her hands smeared with dirt and red streaks that were either blood or crushed petals, her dress ruined.[227]

The scene's descriptions of breathlessness, smeared blood and ripped clothes seem sexually charged as Soroya embraces her darkness and power, needing Parvaneh to maintain her humanity. This gentleness between them is signified in their first kiss, but also in their first touch: "It was calming – […] the feeling of putting something together. It reminded Soroya of working in her garden, pulling away vines and plucking dead petals so that her roses could bloom and thrive."[228] This moment is equally intimate as Soroya destroying her garden, but focuses on a more emotional intimacy as Soroya heals the wounds Azad inflicted on Parvaneh. Genre fiction like fantasy, English explains, offers such an alternative space in

[226] Bashardoust, 69.

[227] Bashardoust, 106.

[228] Bashardoust, 155-56.

which queer identities and desires can be represented freely.[229] Nevertheless, all of these characters are deeply flawed and make many mistakes throughout the novel. Similar to how archetypes are subverted, the novel hereby challenges the original fairytale's dichotomy of good and bad. Just as there is no great evil woman who cursed the princess, but simply a protective mother, Soroya's curse and monstrousness is empowering as much as it is alienating. Only Azad, despite initially being presented as redeemable, is truly evil. The difference lies in how these characters view their humanity. To Azad power means leaving your humanity behind you, while Parvaneh teaches Soroya there is beauty in both: "I told you once I thought your veins were beautiful. Your thorns are lovelier still. But more important, […] I like seeing you so much at peace."[230] By challenging archetypes of *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*'s source, the heteronormative elements of Azad and Soroya's relationship that revolve around power and exclusion are contrasted with Parvaneh and Soroya's queerness, which instead emphasises understanding and healing.

2.2.3 *She Who Became the Sun*

The queer relationships in the novel portray desire in various ways through the ways the protagonists approach the nonconformity of their queerness. This is once again done by evoking history for comparison and contrast, as Sanders suggests.[231] Firstly, Zhu and Ma's relationship revolves around individual desire and perseverance. Although Zhu's monastic background taught her that desire causes suffering, her ambitions and fear of dying as nothing outweighs her worry about pain.[232] On the other hand, Ma convinces herself she does not

[229] English, introduction to *Lesbian Modernism: Censorship, Sexuality and Genre Fiction*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 16-17.

[230] Bashardoust, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn,* 309.

[231] Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation,* 178.

[232] Parker-Chan, *She Who Became the Sun,* 190.

desire at all, believing everything is out of her reach as a woman in fourteenth century. Zhu spends a large part of the novel trying to convince Ma to desire anyway, hinting at her queerness: "Learn to want something for yourself, Ma Xiuying. Not what someone says you should want. Not what you think you should want."[233] This dynamic is emphasised when Zhu proposes, offering Ma freedom, desire, and independence.[234] As such, the novel elaborately describes their shared understanding and desire, both romantically and sexually. Nevertheless, Zhu's limitless ambition and the nonconforming nature of their relationship is a source of worry for Ma: "Ma knew that pain was something she would have to endure over and over again for the transgression of loving and choosing Zhu. It was the price of her own desire."[235] This opposition of desire and suffering, especially relating to the characters' queer identity and relationship, is central to the novel and deeply influenced by its religious and historical context. The epigraph of the novel quotes Buddha's *Fire Sermon* about how all things, like passion, hatred, and grief, are on fire because they are desire, and we must be mindful of them to prevent it from burning everything.[236] Remarkably, this view is entirely ignored by the end of the novel. Zhu gives in to all of her desires and literally holds the fire, becoming the Radiant King with Ma by her side.[237] Therefore, their relationship and desire are depicted as a constant battle and deliberate choice, going directly against dominant narratives like religious teachings. On the other hand, dominant homophobia and abusive of power are at the core of Ouyang and Esen's relationship despite their attraction. Symbolic of their entire relationship, the only intimate moment between them is immediately ruined when

[233] Parker-Chan, 191.

[234] Parker-Chan, 254.

[235] Parker-Chan, 408.

[236] Parker-Chan, 5.

[237] Parker-Chan, 409

Esen voices his attraction to Ouyang's feminine traits: ""You really are as beautiful as a woman." Later, Ouyang thought Esen wouldn't even have noticed: the moment his stillness of anticipation flicked into the stillness of cold shame, as quickly as capping a candle."[238] Any queer desires succumb under the weight of normative standards and expectations. Even when Ouyang betrays him and the two essentially confess their feelings, Esen is oblivious to Ouyang's struggles.[239] *She Who Became the Sun* makes this desperateness for conformity a barrier between them, but also views their queerness as undeniable. When Esen is bleeding out in Ouyang's embrace, this connection is emphasised: "This is your death. That is mine. We're fixed, Esen. […] We always have been."[240] The characters' true desires and identities are revealed, despite the set norms of the source text. As such, Zhu and Ouyang's connection underlines their contrasting acceptance of these relationships. Both of them have selfish goals, yet Ouyang actively chooses suffering by killing Esen. He loses all sense of self and becomes a ghost waiting for revenge and death.[241] On the other hand, Zhu accepts herself and gives in to her desires. Although neither of them fits in, only Zhu embodies her nonconformity and defines herself, making her "someone who seemed neither male nor female, but another substance entirely: something wholly and powerfully of its own kind. The promise of difference, made real."[242] They thus contrast desire and suffering, acceptance and denial, as well as conforming to and challenging the norm.

[238] Parker-Chan, 270.

[239] Parker-Chan, 391.

[240] Parker-Chan, 392.

[241] Parker-Chan, 394.

[242] Parker-Chan, 254.

2.2.4 *The Priory of the Orange Tree*

Queer relationships in *The Priory of the Orange Tree* portray queerness as desirable and possible despite norms and duties. As Peele writes, representations that only seek acceptance rely purely on tolerance form a heterosexual audience and do not speak on "the ways in which queer culture might offer powerful models of community."[243] *Priory*'s narrative focuses on this element of empowerment and revolves around the growth of queer protagonists and their true, unrestricted identities and love. To start with, Ead and Sabran's relationship revolves around the beliefs and rules they must abide by but eventually resist. As explained, Ead learns to understand other perspectives and be critical of her own, moving away from rules about belief. By following her own heart and empathy she ends up with Sabran, having saved the world and become the leader of the Priory. Similarly, the queen tries desperately to do her duty and follow the rules. She marries Lievelyn and becomes pregnant, which she later confesses was against her will.[244] She and Ead share stolen glances and touches, but only when Lievelyn and her child are gone does Sabran allow herself to follow her desires. Even when they are together for the first time, the narrative emphasises the pressures and risks: "Their breaths were hushed, held in anticipation of a knock on the door, a key in the lock, and a torch to are their union. It would light a flame of scandal, and the fire would rise until it scorched them both."[245] Fire and shadow continue to be symbols of their love, especially when they metaphorically step into the light during a candle dance: "Never had they been this close in public. […] She was lost in a dream of haunting voices, in the lilt of flute and harp and shawn, and in Sabran, half concealed by shadow."[246] They dance with

[243] Peele, introduction to *Queer Popular Culture*, 2.

[244] Shannon, *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, 329.

[245] Shannon, 387.

[246] Shannon, 559.

fire in front of the entire court, unafraid of expectations or rules. Most of all, the novel allows these women to choose their own future. In a similar way, Niclays' queer relationship with Jannart contrasts societal expectations through their private memories and happiness. Niclays describes their first meeting, stating that "he had known there was no hope" because of their different ranks.[247] Regardless, the two stayed together even after Jannart married Aleidine. In one of the few flashbacks of their time together, the men's dynamic and personalities are elaborately described, as well as the secrecy of love. "Some [lovers], like Jannart, were locked in marriages they had not chosen. Others were unwed. Others had fallen for people who were far above or below their station. All loved in a way that would see them pay a price in Virtudom."[248] In his grief, Niclays struggles with losing Jannart and his solitude. He describes being "tired of having half a soul" and waiting for death to either reunite him with Jannart, until he eventually finds a reason to live.[249] Surprisingly, this is Aleidine's forgiveness as well. Rather than reprimanding him for their affair, she thanks him: "All I wanted for him was happiness. You were that happiness, Niclays."[250] Finally, there is a noticeably stark contrast between Niclays' storyline about his grief and Ead's, which has more action and is the most impactful on the world's fate. Ead and Sabran save the world and take leader positions, but also decide to reveal the truth about Saint Galian and his religion in the future, likely overturning the way the entire queendom is run and rewriting centuries of history. Shannon thus challenges typical narratives by depicting queerness as empowering and desirable, as well as by allowing women to have power and men to express their emotions, showing acceptance and kindness through its characters despite the norm and

[247] Shannon, 98.

[248] Shannon, 344.

[249] Shannon, 653.

[250] Shannon, 791.

expectations. The novel ultimately conveys the message to be your true self rather than conform.

Overall, the queer relationships of the rewritings actively contrast their heteronormative elements. Both Patroclus and Ead and Niclays' relationships emphasise private feelings and desires. However, *The Song*'s couple fits classical narrative context while *The Priory*'s norms of status and succession are subsequent to queer love, focusing on female power and male emotions. Moreover, the alienating and toxic heteronormativity of Azad is contrasted to Parvaneh's gentle and healing queerness to challenge archetypes and norms, just as Zhu and Ma's perseverance and desire is opposed to Ouyang and Esen's denial and suffering. The novels thus question normative relationships through this representation of queerness.

2.3 Chapter conclusion

These rewritings approach rebuilding the pieces of the source texts they deconstructed very differently. The protagonists and their queer relationships represent experiences, struggles and feelings of queer people in the real world. Because these characters were previously not part of the source text the same way they are in the rewriting, there is an automatic comparison between the identities and relationships of the rebuilt narrative, and the themes and heteronormative elements of their sources. Exclusion, nonconformity, and power therefore become significant in all four novels. Especially *She Who Became the Sun* and *The Priory of the Orange Tree* challenge the exclusion and underrepresentation of queerness in history and literature. Their protagonists set a norm of queerness that explore identity and empathy, while their queer relationships approach nonconformity and queer love as desirable and empowering. The novels actively critique their source texts by deviating from their

narratives and creating a space for nonconformity. These novels as rebellious narrative actions, as Plummer would say, reject dominant narratives and instead emphasise voices of minorities.[251] On the other hand, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn* highlights the struggles of self-acceptance and internalised homophobia, making its protagonist and her queer relationship a clear deviant to the norm. Nevertheless, the narrative still draws a contrast between its source text through the villain who embodies heteronormativity. By restructuring a fairytale and using its associations to comment on queerness and female empowerment, the source narrative is still transformed into something new. *The Song of Achilles*, because of its attempts to stay true to its source in narrative and environment, is least critical of its source. The place of its protagonist within a narrative context adjusted to suit modern audiences causes themes of exclusion and finding a voice to take the upper hand, while the queer relationship is pushed back to being about private desires to fit in its content.

[251] Plummer, *Narrative Power*, 77-78.

Conclusion

I Analysis

These queer fantasy rewritings, in one way or another, interact with the heteronormative elements of the cultural myths and legends they deconstruct. This process retains the elements of the original narrative that make it recognisable to the reader, but leaves enough space for a new story with a new purpose. Critical rereadings, as Moraru points out, can therefore alter model stories to include marginal voices.[252] However, there is a fine line between reaffirming heteronormativity and questioning or actively challenging it. To start with, *The Song of Achilles* has been shown to fall back on the sexist and homophobic environment of its source while also forcing its queer characters to fit modern stereotypes and heterosexual norms. Queerness is therefore mostly private and intimate, causing public exclusion and individual self-image issues. On the other hand, *Girl, Serpent, Thorn* initially engages with fairytale archetypes and dichotomies rooted in heteronormativity, magnifying a hero-saviour trope and internalised homophobia. Nevertheless, it eventually subverts norms and show complexity, acceptance, and love. *She Who Became the Sun* also retains the environment and norms of the heteronormative historical narrative that promotes gendered roles and rejects nonconformity. However, the rewriting actively shows its characters struggling with their queer identity and emphasises possibility and self-definition. Uniquely, *The Priory of the Orange Tree*'s inspiration is framed as a believed, heteronormative narrative of the past that sets the worlds norms on power and gender roles. Through the queer protagonists' experiences and emotions, this dominant narrative is challenged and overturned to highlight the complexity of truth and power of stories. As concluded in the first chapter, the rewritings frame their own narratives through the themes, standards, and environments of

[252] Moraru, "Rewriting and Late Twentieth-Century Narrative," 9.

their source text. This is why deconstructed, heteronormative elements are present in the identities and relationships of all new narratives. Some novels aim to relate their texts to their inspirations and make a connection apparent to the readers, while others create a contrast between the narratives to emphasise nonconformity or critique of heteronormativity. The second chapter showed that the way the narratives are rebuilt to include queer representation has a large influence on this. Although all protagonists deviate from the norm and interact with dominant narratives of power, the way their queerness and desires are depicted within the norm sets apart true representation and simply acceptance, which Peele explains is common in contemporary representation.[253] In order to actually challenge the norm these narratives must use, as Fredrickson writes, the detached space that allows critical thought about representing marginalised individuals.[254] They must show a possibility for something different: a world where queerness is desired, rather than just present or tolerated.

Finally, this leads me back to the main research question. Fantasy novels from the 21st century that rewrite Asian and European cultural myths and legends show a tension between heteronormative and queer narratives through the representation of gender and sexuality by contrasting heteronormative gender roles, stereotypes, and standards of their source texts with identities and relationships that highlight the experiences and emotions of queer individuals. As pointed out in the introduction, I expected queer fantasy rewritings to fully reject dominant heteronormativity by continuously challenging their sources and highlighting nonconformity through queer characters and their actions. However, my analysis has proven otherwise. Since many myths and legends about heroes and rulers in some way involve love, succession, or power that fit gender roles and promote heterosexuality, rewritings of these

[253] Peele, introduction to *Queer Popular Culture*, 1-2.

[254] James and Mendlesohn, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, 58.

stories contain similar heteronormative elements. Dominant narratives of the past have always overlooked queer voices, and the goal of many of these texts is in fact to create this tension not by diminishing their sources, but by placing queer and heteronormative narratives side by side in order to reveal their oppositions. Regardless, the texts portray environments that follow the norms set by their source texts, causing protagonists and their relationships to be forced into the same heteronormative and heterosexual boxes or stereotypes. The difference lies in how these characters attempt to break out of their confines and represent queerness to combat the heteronormative elements. The novels demonstrate this through a private, intimate portrayal of queer desire, individual and narrative subversion of set types, and even by overturning the entire system that set those norms in the fantasy world. The result of this tension between norms and nonconformity depends entirely on the extent to which the heteronormativity of the source texts is challenged. The alternate narrative can simply be presented as a possibility within the source and its norms as they are, or it could be a more radical call to question dominant narratives, including the source text, and the standards they set and continue to enforce. All of this can shed light on positions and power of queer individuals in the real world. These novels clearly show how representation of queer experiences, feelings, and desires is becoming more common. As has been pointed out by Plummer, narratives have power and influence the world when they are brought alive by narrative action.[255] In their interaction with and rejection of dominant narratives, underrepresented queer stories are made of consequence too.[256] Although these novels pave the way for something positive, they can neither change history nor the present. Heteronormativity still dictates most narratives and leaves queerness underrepresented, as it has been for centuries. These novels are only the first step towards representation and giving

[255] Plummer, *Narrative Power: The struggle for human value*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 22-24.

[256] Plummer, 76-77.

queer people a place in the world, and there is a long way to go before queerness can be portrayed as something normal, empowering *and* desirable.

II Critical reflection

The texts that form the foundation of my research are beneficial and extensive. However, my research has revealed various gaps and blind spots. First and foremost, adaptation studies have developed and expanded, with influential academics such as Hutcheon and Leitch paving the way for contemporary adaptation theory. Many of these texts focus on defining the field and, most importantly, the position of adaptations compared to their sources. Within this, studies on rewriting emerged. Calinescu and Moraru utilise concepts like hypertextuality to define the writing of their time. This, however, causes most of these studies to be partial to and limited by a postmodernist viewpoint. As my own research shows, the world and its narratives are constantly changing. Adaptations are becoming more common, especially in film and television, and although rewritings remain understudied there is a great deal more relevant content to *be* studied. Rather than attempting to prove the value of adaptations for literary criticism, as previous research has done, contemporary studies should take into account contents and effects of adaptations. Especially the many discourses and paradigms that have come after postmodernism, such as metamodernism, are not included in many studies. Additionally, Plummer, whose theories are more up to date, faces another issue. His concepts of narrative power and action, as have been defined and applied throughout my research, are incredibly useful in seeing the effects of narratives within the current complex, global network of media. Nevertheless, Plummer's *Narrative Power* is clearly written from the perspective of a sociologist. Although it mentions various narratives in novels, speeches, and politics, the book merely outlines theories and concepts that are based on subjective experiences and ideas of what narratives do, rather than defined elements to use in a critical literary analysis. While this makes Plummer's theories widely applicable, as my research has

shown, it also causes ambiguity and often unclarity in his definitions. Of course, tackling such a broad topic is not easy. Studies on the fantasy genre, for instance by Fabrizi or James and Mendlesohn, come across a similar problem. Like adaptation theorists, these researchers explain that fantasy is stigmatised and undervalued. As such, they attempt to catch up on the limited research by mapping the field and its history, focusing on nineteenth and twentieth century texts and their audiences. Their books are substantial and detailed, but simultaneously include many distinct topics and overlook important fundamental elements, thus being limited in their portrayal of the current-day genre. This especially caused difficulty for my own outline of the academic field. In smaller, more recent studies on rewritings and fantasy this is less of an issue. Since most of them are case studies, for instance the ones by Haneş or Szmigiero, the conclusions on dominant narratives and reinterpretations are based on close analyses of more recent texts. My research benefited greatly from these detailed studies, providing an overview of the latest research as well as examples of analyses on my topic. Unfortunately, these academics form a minority. The research on fantasy rewritings is minimal, especially in combination with queer literary theory. Queer theory itself dates back over thirty years, yet is continuously developing as contemporary popular narratives change. Peele's *Queer Popular Culture* provided a useful basis about this topic for my research, especially the portrayal of queer empowerment and representation. It concerns itself with a considerable amount of different media and narratives: fashion, film, politics, and even education. However, due to this broadness the book lacks varied, critical analyses of literature. The research that *does* concentrate on queerness in genre fiction is once again uncommon, focusing on singular case studies or sub-categories, like Spencer, English and Dielmann do. My own research and analysis stood out in its scope compared to these extensive books and small-scale papers. Finally, throughout my research it became apparent that there is a lack of broader literary analyses and theory that emphasise empowerment.

Many of these studies merely underline the acceptance of queerness and completely overlook Peele's significant argument that cultural narratives should be reshaped specifically to empower queerness. All in all, many older studies are still extremely useful, but desperately in need of revisions and additions to be relevant to the complex contemporary literary environment. More recent analyses give valuable overviews and analyses of contemporary popular narratives, yet rarely combine the different theories of this research. Rewritings, fantasy, and queerness are all popular and approached in various studies, but few academics tackle all of them at once.

III Further research

Following the analysis itself and these perceived research gaps and blind spots, there are many topics my research barely touched upon. Adaptations, rewritings, and their subsequent theories are always evolving, living up to Hutcheon's claim that art and stories are constantly born from each other. There are endless rewritten stories about Sleeping Beauty, Achilles and Patroclus, and other heroes and rules that can reveal how our view of narratives of the past and our own reality has changed. Additionally, there is much to be explored about the compatibility of fantasy and queerness. With studies like Roberts and MacCallum-Stewart's *Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Popular Fantasy*, queer readings of both new and old texts can be used to reflect on heteronormativity and queer representation. Comparing the historically male-dominated field of genre fiction with up-and-coming feminist and queer novels could be another approach to this topic, shedding light on the development of the genre. This also relates to the sub-category of cultural fantasy. The rising popularity of novels inspired by cultural myths and legends, especially Chinese and Japanese, not only deserves its own dedicated research, it also serves as proof of the growing inclusion and representation of minorities in English fantasy. The influence of culture on the primary novels of my research also remains largely unexplored, such as *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*'s Ancient Persian

worldbuilding or *The Priory of the Orange Tree*'s long list of cultural inspirations. The same is the case for the other rewritings of Miller and Bashardoust, or Shannon's prequel to *Priory* and Parker-Chan's sequel to *She Who Became the Sun*. Moreover, outside of a literary analysis it would also be interesting to research the way these novels were marketed and how the authors promote and speak about their own intentions and goals. Miller, for example, explicitly states on her site: "I did not deliberately set out to tell a deliberately "gay" love story; rather, I was deeply moved by the love between these two characters."[257] This completely contrasts the way Parker-Chan speaks about their novel, claiming: "reimagining the history of imperial China is my attempt to grapple with the exclusionary elements of the history and culture that's been bequeathed to me."[258] Analysing this in comparison to heteronormative or queer elements, or even the novel's popularity, could reveal more about contemporary queer fantasy rewritings. Finally, the concepts of narrative power and action can and should be applied to more research on representation in narratives. Viewing rewritings as results of narrative actions that can empower others and counter dominant narratives not only emphasises their effect on norms and standards in the real world, but also proves their value in critical analyses. Fantasy, rewritings, adaptations, and other stigmatised ways of storytelling can make the difference for minorities that have been excluded from history. These narratives can give them a glimpse of a world where they belong, and pave the way for inclusion and diversity in theirs as well.

[257] Madeline Miller, "Q&A with Madeline Miller," Madeline Miller, accessed 3 January 2025, https://madelinemiller.com/q-a-the-song-of-achilles/.

[258] Michele Kirichanskaya, "Interview with Shelley Parker-Chan, author of She Who Became the Sun," Geeksout, 1 September 2023, https://www.geeksout.org/2023/09/01/interview-with-shelley-parker-chan-author-of-she-who-became-the-sun/.

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