



Research Article

Reading Between Worlds: Gendered Narratives in Fiction

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Abstract

This piece considers the way that we can use fictional narratives, especially secondary world stories, to examine the way that gender is translated from one world to another, and how that translation often perpetuates gender stereotypes, hierarchical biases, and sustained gender oppression. In the final section of this paper, three concepts of narrative design are defined: gender-apparent, gender-insinuated, and gender-absent. All three concepts explain how gender can be presented in secondary worlds, with gender-apparent narratives referring to gender being presented explicitly, gender-insinuated as implicitly, and gender-absent as excluded, and the benefits and detriments of all three. The goal of this piece is to provide methods of analysis for fictional narratives in relation to the presentation of contemporary gender systems and the possibility of perpetuating damaging ideologies.

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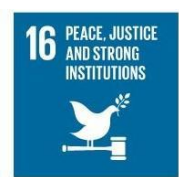
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Introduction

Speculative fiction, bursting with artistic depictions of made-up worlds, beings, gods, magic, and more, is a genre that has the capability of extending and challenging our imagination beyond the world within which we live. Our modern fantasy and science fiction hoist the banners of our modern mythology, and we are pulled along by new fantastical figures and worlds that hold morals, quests and narrative structures that we may see and pursue in reflection of our own lives. A central component of speculative fiction is that of a secondary world - we are immersed in a newly created world that we can escape into - and these secondary worlds can hold a significant social benefit in relation to what is *possible*. Dan Hassler-Forest argues that engaging with massive story worlds can help us "question, challenge, and perhaps even change the world we live in," (2016, p. 6), and Judith Roof argues that these systems, and the way that these structures can change and vary, may offer us a tool for 'revising' gender inequality and other identity issues, as we can create stories outside of our system of gender and sexuality in our primary world (2015). While this piece works from an agreement with this optimism, it is also necessary to consider the underlying ideologies - influenced by dominant hermeneutical resources - that could perpetuate detrimental ideals through these narratives instead of influencing major change in our primary world.

The space between our world and a secondary world provides a way to understand what is written 'between the lines,' and this space allows for a critical opportunity to see what is assumed *inherent* in our primary world by examining what we find inherent in the secondary worlds - it allows us to *read between worlds*. It allows us to see what remains unchanged in the systems of the secondary world, as reconstructed from our primary world, and what may be perpetuated with regard to stereotypes and implicit biases. This piece focuses on reading between worlds, specifically in relation to the gender binary system, the construction of gender, and the norms and hierarchies that are linked into this system. To do as such, §1 considers the process of reading between worlds, which includes the necessary recognition of dominant hermeneutical resources that are often referenced in designing new worlds. Following this, §2 details the conception of the gender binary that will be used throughout this piece, before linking the ways that the binary connects into a norm/anti-norm system of freedom and oppression and, when used as the problem/solution of character arcs, how this can perpetuate assumptions of *what goes with whom*. Finally, §3, I define three new concepts, all distinct types of gendered narratives in secondary fiction: gender-apparent, gender-insinuated, and gender-absent. These definitions include how these narratives either perpetuate or reject an inherent gender system and how this play between norm and anti-norm can provide benefits and detriments in terms of audience interpretation of the implicit assumptions around gender. The central goal of this piece is to provide a methodology, of a sort, for illuminating what sits beneath the surface of our fictions; to understand what is *between worlds* is to understand what biases are so entrenched in our common understandings that we no longer

can distinguish between what is inherent in our primary world, and what is constructed. Once we can 'read between,' we can address the impact of these perpetuations.

§1: Reading Between Worlds

Reading between worlds - I mean this as an encouragement of distinguishing between our world and the worlds of fiction, as the act of worldbuilding illuminates the concepts of our own world, allowing transparency around norms and representations that may otherwise be opaque. Tolkien gave us the term 'secondary-world' fiction, worlds that are separate from primary worlds, a term picked up by Wolf in his book on worldbuilding. Wolf defines secondary worlds as "imaginary worlds created by authors," while the primary world exists as the "material, intersubjective world in which we live" (2014, p. 23), which we can consider to be Earth as a whole, or a particular nation, city, or other location within the time period that the secondary world was created in. Secondary worlds are designed to allow us to enter and be transported (Green, 2022), absorbing us in a way that allows us to forgo our actual environment.

Authors creating secondary worlds are not creators but rather 'sub-creators,' or 'creating under,' in that "human beings are limited to using the pre-existing concepts [and] finding new combinations of them that explore the realm of possibilities, many of which do not exist in the primary world" (Wolf, 2014, p. 23). This seems easy to comprehend - the imagination is powerful, but we cannot create what we do not know exists. Secondary worlds are made up of some rearranged versions of our primary world, often growing from myth; elves are simply humans minus their mortality, plus pointy ears, and dragons may have been imagined from the bones of dinosaurs, unto which wings and fire-breathing were affixed.

Between our primary world and the rearranged concepts of the secondary worlds that we engage in, I see there to be a significant space, one that allows us to understand *choice* (Roof, 2015) in the act of storytelling and worldbuilding. I have made a similar argument in the past (Stamson, 2022) about adaptations from novel to screen and the impact on queer narratives, examining places where sexuality (or gender, or race) is 'swapped' during the adaptation (e.g., a straight character in the novel is changed to a queer character in the film for representation purposes). I have argued that this is where we are able to see which characteristics were given to the new identity that wasn't a part of the original identity. The types of characteristics that are assigned during this swap is another critical space to see how certain characteristics are normatively linked to stereotypes or biases about individuals and, in terms of finding new combinations, are not rearranged (e.g., queerness needing to be accompanied with violence in relation to coming out). This same space to evaluate the choices made appears in 'reading between worlds,' as well; when components of identity are rearranged or not rearranged in worldbuilding, what norms can we see in that reconfiguration?

1.1: Reconfiguring Dominant Concepts

Reading between primary and secondary worlds can help to illuminate the choices made in worldbuilding, and what beliefs, stereotypes, or biases the blueprint of the primary world - a guide along which the secondary world was constructed - contains. Judith Roof argues that fictional narratives work as systems, systems that function along a set of rules; in my previous work on adaptation, I cited the use of 'sumptuary codes', a term from Fields and Fields that references the way that certain codes or rules, similar to Roof's argument, are active in our social understandings that denotes "what goes with what or whom" (2014, p. 25). In applying Fields and Fields concept to media representation, I argued that when production teams are adapting a novel into a film, there are certain identity rules that they seem to rely upon - perhaps unknowingly - when developing the adaptation. Secondary worlds seem to function in this same way, being built and designed in a way that cites similar rules.

These social, coded, norms are something that epistemologists relate to a 'sociological imagination,' wherein we have *shared conceptions of identity*, "conceptions alive in our social imagination that govern, for instance, what it is or means to be a woman or a man, or what it is or means to be gay or straight, young or old, and so on" (Fricker, 2007, p. 14); Sally Haslanger, among many other gender theorists, argues that the definitions of women and men are "products of a certain social state of affairs...a complex social matrix of practices, norms, institutions [etc.]..." (2000, p. 233), just as Judith Butler argued in *Gender Trouble* that gender is a performed, social, construction (1990/2006). Problematically, these conceptions can be tied to stereotypes that create damaging assumptions of people based on their identities and, as these concepts are already embedded in our shared concepts, these understandings act implicitly through the use of shared hermeneutical resources.

Hermeneutical resources are the concepts and knowledge that we use to define and understand our experiences. Rebecca Mason distinguishes between dominant and non-dominant hermeneutical resources (2011): dominant resources are more broadly accessible, while non-dominant resources are typically based in marginalized communities. Dominant resources hold more implicit biases than non-dominant resources; stereotypes against racial groups, for instance, may infect dominant resources but are likely absent in the non-dominant resources of those same racialized communities. These dominant resources, which include stereotypes and biases, are not only more accessible but, as Arianna Falbo argues, these dominant resources can create a hermeneutical excess that works to "crowd out, defeat, or preempt the application of an available and more accurate concept" (2022, 354). So, these dominant resources not only 'dominate' the social imagination, but can also act to make the non-dominant resources even more inaccessible.

These dominant resources, in crowding out the non-dominant, are the most likely to be referenced in relation to fictional system rules, and 'what goes with whom,' when worldbuilders are combining concepts from our primary world in new ways to create secondary worlds. Hassler-Forest argues that a text is not a *self-contained* system, but rather a "reflection of a specific organization of historically grounded social relations" (2016, 9), and if dominant resources have historically organized our shared primary world conceptions, then it is likely that these are the concepts being reconfigured. And, if dominant resources include stereotypes and biases *and* act to cover up or obscure non-dominant resources, then the fictional system that is being built is being built using a blueprint that includes a perpetuation of these stereotypes and biases, perhaps without knowing that these detrimental concepts are pre-built into the design.

The act of mixing and matching of concepts that we find in things like secondary world fictional governments or theologies is not as consistently deployed in the configuration process of social identity - mass media seems to struggle with refashioning social identity into a sort of new identity mosaic. Instead, these 'historically grounded social relations' still appear in these secondary worlds. The stereotypes and detrimental biases that surround identity markers like gender, race, and sexuality seem to be concepts of the primary world that do not get pulled apart and scrambled in a secondary world; even gravity seems more likely to be upended than heteronormativity. It is here, at this failure for reorganization, that the 'reading between worlds' can stimulate critical analysis.

§2: The Gender Binary & Minimal Departure

When we are reading between worlds, we are able to compare the norms of the primary world and the secondary worlds, and reach a conclusion about what remains unchanged and, thus, is assumed to be *inherent* in our primary world social norms - the resources that we allow to exchange between worlds without deeper consideration. The focus of this piece is on the normative gender binary, and how reading between worlds can show us that there is an assumption that this binary, the social consequences of the binary, and the norms that extend from the binary, are inherent, as these are all automatically transferred into a secondary world. The gender binary of our (Western, Euro-centric) primary world sustains that there are two genders, that gender matches biological sex, that sexual attraction is maintained as being only for the opposite sex, and that the female gender is inferior to the superior male gender. This gender binary, especially the power dynamics that interplay throughout it, is a creation of our primary world. To see the reiteration of this binary in secondary worlds seems to suggest that in the development of mass media, there is an underlying belief that the binary system *and* the accompanying norms are inherent - the binary system of gender is problematically shown to belong as a created primary concept that cannot be fully pulled apart or altered for secondary worlds, where literally anything we can imagine is possible, from talking trees to ice dragons.

The gender binary and the norm system of our primary world, in our contemporary understanding, includes what Sally Haslanger has named as 'gender as class,' wherein "S is classed as a woman within a context C iff S is marked in C as a target for subordination on the basis of actual or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's role in biological reproduction" (Jenkins, 2016, p. 408); women are a class that comes-to-be through subordination via the external perception of her body. Katharine Jenkins added to Haslanger's definition, arguing that not only is 'gender as class' necessary, but 'gender as identity' as well. Jenkins defines 'gender as identity' as "S has a female gender identity iff S's internal 'map' is formed to guide someone classed as a woman through the social or material realities that are, in that context, characteristic of women as a class" (2016, p. 410). Both definitions of 'woman' rely on the same baseline conception: there is something guiding the construction of gender, with social norms acting externally and an 'internal map' acting internally. For both, the definition of a woman includes the definition of subordination and oppression - this is a *normative* definition that is linked to the term 'woman'.

Secondary worlds that pull gender definitions from dominant resources seem to wrap in this definition in a lot of ways, but not completely; Haslanger's 'gender as class' seems more likely to be reiterated in a secondary world without 'gender as identity' and always including subordination. Many stories, some of which are examples used in §3, also still seem to build on a very Beauvoirian concept of the Subject and the Other - a Beauvoirian/traditional gender binary situates men in the Subject space, and women in the space of the Other, and maintains a hierarchy between two genders that restricts women's ability to transcend from being an 'object' to being a 'subject'. Both definitions of womanhood are frequent in fictional narratives, and both are *problematic* if directly conveyed - if we have secondary worlds that are reiterating definitions of womanhood either through Haslanger's or Beauvoir's definitions, then they are reiterating the necessity that there is subordination and relational definitions in the term of 'woman'. Our primary world version of a gender binary (and the accompanying norms) is a component of our dominant hermeneutical resources - it is a common understanding of gender and gender relations. We see, in secondary worlds, gender being set up in this binary that still includes either being classed as subordinated or as being Othered in relation to a Subject - both are problematically reiterating a necessary oppressed state of women.

Let us consider the gender binary as a component of our folk-psychological views, which Mitchell Green defines as how we believe people would behave (2022); a failure to adhere to this folk-psychology is likely to lead to resistance against the fiction or give rise to disbelief in what the author is saying. We could also consider these boundaries of psychological restrictions to maintain along the 'principle of minimal departure,' or the rule that when we interpret other worlds, we interpret it as "conforming as far as possible to our representations of the actual world" (Punday, 132). Punday notes that we are likely to apply this principle more 'rigorously' to more realistic fiction, and 'loosely' to more fantastical fiction (134). Thus, we have flexibility in terms of our

walking, talking, trees in fantasy, as Tolkien's Ents still very much look and seem like trees, exist in forests, and are twisted bodies of roots and bark; we would have less flexibility in believability if Ents appeared in something like Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Fiction must, if avoiding resistance and encouraging imagination, adhere to some psychological and structural understanding of our primary world in order to avoid a failure in uptake.

In terms of the gender binary of our primary world, I see this as calling up similar possible issues - in that there is some sense of a 'minimal departure' that is reasonable (i.e., does not create significant resistance) in relation to how we present a normative system of gender. There is a certain conception of gender and the normative gender system (which includes oppression and subordination) is grounded as our nexus of common understanding of gender, just as the trees we see outside our windows are the nexus of our common understanding of trees. With this understanding, we include norms and expectations - *what goes with what or whom*, to return to Fields & Fields. If audiences or readers are resistant to the edges of the minimal departure for things like magical creatures or unreasonable psychological responses to certain events, then it seems likely that they would also have a resistance against a departure from a normative system like gender norms, wherein moving too far away from the norms of the gender binary is likely to create major resistance.

2.1: Logic of the Norm/Anti-Norm

The logic of the norm/anti-norm, coming from Marjorie Jolles, is defined as a typical approach to understanding norms like gender norms, in that "we imagine norms as only repressive [and] imagin[e] freedom from that repression as the absence of a norm" (2012, 305). In the gender binary, if we are to liberate ourselves from being subordinated, we may be 'transcending' but we are not escaping from the oppressive system itself. Instead, we are looking at a freedom from the norm as being the way to successfully emerge from oppression; i.e., if we simply 'transcend' the restrictions of the normative structure, then we have reached some sort of liberation. Jolles notes, though, that this is a 'fantasy of transcendence,' one that does not truly allow us to move away from a restricted normative system. This fantasy arises from the formulation of the norm/anti-norm, in that "norms inform the conditions of imagining a state of anti-norm" (Jolles, 2012), or in other words, the anti-norm relies upon the norm to create the fantasy of 'freedom'. Without the norm, there would be no anti-norm state - as many philosophers note, this reliance on each other maintains the necessity of each other. 'Escaping' into the anti-norm requires that the norm itself still exists as something to be escaped from. This further subsumes the norm in social construction, and makes it a necessary component of our social experience and of the gender binary.

This norm/anti-norm experience seems to be the point of minimal departure - we can understand that women can have agency, but it may create resistance to move past the binary system itself,

or to move in-and-around the norms in a way that differs from our general folk-psychology of how women's liberation or oppression appears to work. This norm/anti-norm experience seems to be what is structuring the ways that we write gendered narratives (specifically, women's narratives) in our fiction. In most fictional narratives, the plot is designed around a problem, and the characters set out to find a solution. This gendered norm/anti-norm is at the heart of many women's narratives in fiction, with the primary world problem of gender oppression being maintained across worlds. This maintains the *necessity* of this problem and that the hierarchy of gender is something that *has to exist* even in our most imagined worlds. Challenging this idea requires a deeper consideration of how we are presenting the norm/anti-norm experience in women's narratives in fiction and fantasy. As such, I have distinguished between three types of gendered narratives that appear frequently in secondary-world fiction: gender-apparent, gender-insinuated, and gender-absent. Gender-apparent remains within the norm/anti-norm binary, gender-insinuated plays at the 'fantasy of transcendence,' and gender-absent moves in-and-around norms - there are more than likely other narratives that can be distinguished, but these three are the focus of this piece.

§3: Gendered Narratives in Secondary Worlds

If we understand basic narrative in fiction as a) presenting a problem and b) pursuing a solution to that problem, then it seems as though we can see the norm/anti-norm within that design; the oppressive norm is (a) the problem and transcending that norm into the anti-norm is (b) the solution to that problem. When we apply this narrative problem/solution to the gender binary norm/anti-norm, we can see fictional narratives as often presenting gender hierarchy and oppression (object-ness) as the norm, and the transcendence and escape from this oppression into subject-ness as the anti-norm. This section focuses on three distinct ways of presenting this problem/solution within gendered narratives. Identifying these three narratives is imperative in working to distinguish gender ideologies that sit beneath the lexical surface, and may create influence through the broad reach of mass media; lexical choice is the words and dialogue used to build worlds and present character thoughts and interactions, which are likely to show us the ways that specific types of characters are linked to particular ideological positions (Fludernik, 196). Pairing this with a 'reading between worlds' allows an examination of the way that this norm/anti-norm is perpetuated in secondary worlds, and what that may tell us about some of the remaining assumptions about the gender binary in our primary world. All of the examples provided in the following sections exist in some form of a secondary world, though these examples are in no way all-inclusive; it is also important to note that any examples used in this section are not presented to criticize the work itself but, rather, to use it as an example for insight. To examine these norm/anti-norm designs, I present three concepts of narrative style: *gender-apparent*, *gender-insinuated*, and *gender-absent*. There are also likely other approaches to gender in secondary

worlds, but these three concepts encompass a broad range of popular contemporary fantasy, and have the possibility to act as useful tools for unearthing gender ideologies.

3.1: Gender-Apparent Narratives

In a gender-apparent narrative, we find that the secondary world possesses the same gender norms that we experience in our own, primary, world. A gender-apparent narrative directly mimics and reiterates the structures of the primary gender binary; it is entrenched in it, the character narratives adhere to it, and the secondary world is designed in a way that incorporates it. Gender-apparent narratives directly present the norm/anti-norm as the central problem/solution: gender oppression (object-ness) is the norm, and emerging into power and out of being 'classed' as a woman (subject-ness) is the anti-norm. This representation of the primary world gender binary in the secondary world is thus *apparent* - we *see* recognizable structures of gender, the norms of gender are *heard* through direct reference in dialogue, and we *understand* that there is an ideology of gender norms built into character and plot design.

Gender-apparent narratives focus mostly on this problem/solution for female characters, wherein she is settled in a hierarchical concept of gender, always a 'woman' identified in relation to a 'man,' and this relation being distinctly coupled with oppression of power and agency; she is marked as the "target for subordination" (Haslanger, 2000, p. 408). Her primary plot focus is upending this oppression in a way that, at the very least, allows her to function with some agency within the prescribed institution of normative gender. Gender-apparent narratives, for women, maintain a plot structure and world design that necessitates women are 'marked for subordination' and that, in this, they must prevail against the system of oppression.

Consider Rhaenyra Targaryen in HBO's *House of the Dragon* and Daenerys Targaryen in HBO's *Game of Thrones* series, among many others. Their backstories are not atypical in speculative fiction narratives. They are women in positions of possible power - in the pursuit of their 'destinies', they are met with negative public responses due to their gender, something often verbalized in dialogue or assumed in interactions between characters. Rhaenyra Targaryen in *House of the Dragon* (based on George R. R. Martin's book *Fire and Blood* and set in the world of Westeros) is made her father's sole heir at a young age, and raised to one day become the Queen of Westeros; her father remarries and has sons, who challenge her claim to the throne, leading to war. Her storyline is focused on this turmoil, on the subordination that comes with her gender, and her inability to be granted the position that she was raised for, simply because a male heir was born after her.

Daenerys (Dany) Targaryen in *Game of Thrones* (based on George R. R. Martin's book series, *A Song of Ice and Fire* and also set in the world of Westeros) is also the heir to the Westerosi throne, centuries after Rhaenyra. Dany's storyline begins with her being sold for an alliance and wealth,

used as an object for trade and for reproduction. As she progresses, she faces gendered resistance - her brother is infuriated by her rise to power, she is offered marriage for alliances many times - and she grapples with the turmoil of motherhood, in relation to her own unborn child, freed slaves, and her dragons. Her character arc works towards her reclaiming her throne, which is undermined when a male heir is revealed; loyalty begins to switch to the side of the male heir and, when Dany achieves her goal of claiming the throne, he kills her moments after she takes her place.

The progression of these characters is an example of this gender-apparent problem/solution design - there is an oppressive system of gender that associates their capabilities and rationalities to the assumed-inherent characteristics of their biological sex. With this problem/solution set up, these characters are locked into a narrative that centers around the overcoming of their gender position in society - both Rhaenyra and Daenerys exist in a gender-apparent narrative, marked for subordination.

Gender-apparent narratives have the possibility of providing both benefits and detriments in terms of social impact. The benefit of the gender-apparent narrative revolves around the ability for audiences to visualize a primary-world-problem in a secondary-world-depiction; we get to see the problem/solution of the gender binary played out in front of us on screen, transported into an experience that allows us to grapple with our own experience of gender oppression. As we are not exterior to a gender binary in our primary world - a system still deeply entrenched in our dominant hermeneutical resources - perceiving the struggles of a woman in a fictional oppressed state may assist to embolden other similarly-identifying people to strengthen their resolve in fighting against oppression. In *House of the Dragon*, Rhaenyra is a prevailed Queen, fighter, and dragon-rider. She has many followers, is openly respected by those followers, and is shown to be an adept ruler and strategist. Daenerys rules multiple kingdoms throughout her journey, and she is seen as a loving and benevolent Queen; she is also shown as being clever, strategic, and highly intelligent. With positive characteristics within an oppressive system, seeing a depiction of our primary world struggles through a secondary world could create a beneficial experience of empowerment.

The detriment of a gender-apparent narrative arises when considering the presentation of the norm/anti-norm as a closed system, one which allows characters to transcend the norm itself *into* the anti-norm, instead of beyond it, and how the repetition of this system in a secondary world (where anything could be reconfigured) perpetuates the belief that this type of gender system is inherent. When Rhaenyra and Daenerys are born into Westeros, they are 'assigned' a gender - they are classed - and this assignment is accompanied by gender norms that stick throughout their lives, and further impact their ambitions and desires. We are accustomed to the norm of gender assignment, and we recognize the normative existence of oppressions and allowances based on this gender assignment - but being *accustomed to* a norm (seeing it as a normative concept) does not necessitate that the norm is *inherent*. Gender and the gender binary are not

inherent concepts - they are constructed - but our ideas of 'what goes with whom,' reinforces the assumption that it exists inherent in our primary world.

To transfer the gender binary and its norms from primary to secondary worlds, without reconfiguration, is to maintain it within the bounds of 'minimal departure' - just as we cannot introduce Ents into *Jane Eyre*, gender-apparent narratives seem to show that we cannot introduce alternative configurations of gender into secondary, re-designed, worlds. In order for us to have our norm, we must have the anti-norm, and thus we must have the existence of a binary structuring these - in this case, a gender binary. This has the possibility of creating a detrimental impact on dominant resources, as reinforcing and repeating this binary norm is likely to continue to entrench its legitimacy in our commonly accessed interpretive tools, creating an unending loop of reference back to the same gender-oppressive system design. The fixation of this rule creates a reinforcement and perpetuation of the violence of this system within and without our imagination across a mass-media platform that impacts the social expression and identity of millions of agents. This norm/anti-norm system then appears to be reinforced as being inescapable - Rhaenyra and Dany, even acting towards the anti-norm, may individually escape the oppression of their gender, but the oppressive system remains in perpetuity because the structure of the secondary world relies upon its existence. Gender-apparent narratives exist in what Jolles calls a 'fantasy of transcendence,' never acknowledging that it *is* a fantasy; gender-insinuated narratives, as I will move to next, seem to play at this transcendence fantasy in a different way.

3.2: Gender-Insinuated Narratives

In a gender-insinuated narrative, the secondary world appears to have a system of gender that is similar to our primary world, but the oppression of the gender system is not a necessary component of the problem/solution in terms of how the character is directly facing the world. In gender-insinuated narratives, there is a gender system in the secondary world - not necessarily identical to our primary world system - that includes gender norms, rules, and hierarchies, but that may be distinctly different in terms of how those norms impact the women in the story. Gender-insinuated narratives present the norm/anti-norm as a background problem, one that may be referenced, but only in relation to other problems/solutions. The agency of women in gender-insinuated narratives is not necessarily impacted by the gender system, but the system still exists with some sort of pressure on social identities. Thus, gender is *insinuated* - there may be reorganized structures of gender, there may be some or little reference to gender in dialogue, and we can understand gendered ideologies built into the characters and plot design based on the way that the society treats these characters.

Let's consider the norm/anti-norm narrative; gender oppression is the norm, and emerging into power is the anti-norm. In the case of gender-insinuated narratives, the narratives exist as post-

transcendence, denying that there is a fantasy to the idea, and showing that there is a possibility in secondary worlds for women to transcend because they are already granted power in these worlds. But, what seems to still be occurring, is that the narrative remains trapped in the 'fantasy of transcendence,' without acknowledging the process of movement from object-ness to subject-ness. If we return to the understanding that, in order for the anti-norm to exist, there must be a norm, the placement of women's narratives already in the state of the anti-norm (subject-ness) still reaffirms that there is a norm that must be escaped from. The binary and the norms and restrictions of the gender system of the primary world still exist in this secondary world, women are just situated on the 'other side,' with fully recognized agency. It is just that the agency that they are given in these narratives is still based on their ability to transcend object-ness, and the necessity of subordination still exists in the gender system.

Consider the Aes Sedai from Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* series, or the Bene Gesserit from Frank Herbert's *Dune* series; both are women-only groups that are trained in the use of significant magic, which grants them significant social power. The Aes Sedai from Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* series are a group of women trained to channel the 'One Power' and have a "vast amount of power and influence over the nations of the world...advisors to kings and queens" (A Wheel of Time Wiki, n.d.). The Bene Gesserit from Frank Herbert's *Dune* series are a "social, religious, and political force," who train to "obtain superhuman powers and abilities that seem magical to outsiders" (Wikipedia, n.d.). For both the Aes Sedai and the Bene Gesserit, the members are grouped into this training because they are women with this capacity and these groups have (mostly) women as members.

But, even granted large amounts of social and political power, these groups are referenced with certain concepts and language that may relate them back to the oppression of our primary world gender norms. For both the Aes Sedai and the Bene Gesserit, they are painted as manipulative, cunning, and secretive; terms that connect as characteristics for women all the way back to 1792 and Mary Wollstonecraft, where she suggested that women were being trained in *cunning*, or "knowledge of human weakness" (2017, 13). So, these concepts are embedded in the dominant hermeneutical resources, reiterated, and perpetuated by the representation of women with powerful magic in secondary worlds. These groups have already 'transcended,' but there is still a treatment that aligns with the normative oppression of our primary world system.

In terms of benefit and detriment, I see this as having similar results as gender-apparent narratives. If fiction acts to show us possibilities and reconfigurations of our primary world concepts, then we are able to be transported into an experience wherein women have agency and power already, and they are not oriented within a necessity to 'transcend' from object-ness and they are not classed as subordinated; we get to see the 'other side' of the gender-apparent narratives, where women have succeeded in claiming power for themselves that is socially recognized. Just as with gender-apparent narratives, this could hold a benefit for empowerment.

For detriment, it also holds similarly to the gender-apparent narratives; in order for the Aes Sedai and the Bene Gesserit to be in positions of power, they had to transcend their positions of powerlessness, a position within which other women in the narrative still remain. This, again, reinforces the gender binary, but it also reinforces the ideas of characteristics - returning to 'what goes with whom'. When we have powerful women being referred to as 'cunning,' as using their power to manipulate (typically men and political systems), then the narrative is continuing to reinforce that upon granting women power and a place of subject-ness, their power will be utilized in a way that reinforces the negative characteristics that are related to womanhood in the dominant hermeneutical resources. This is not necessarily the characteristic that is going to be related to powerful and powered women, but there are likely to be other negative characteristics of a similar nature. So, both gender-apparent and gender-insinuated narratives may be beneficial for empowerment but also seem likely to uphold detrimental assumptions about gender and the gender binary system. Gender-absent narratives, which I move to next, may provide an alternative to these concepts.

3.3: Gender-Absent Narratives

In a gender-absent narrative, we see that our secondary world is designed in a different fashion than our primary world, and different than our gender-apparent and -insinuated worlds. In worldbuilding and production, a gender-absent narrative faces the idea that the gender binary must exist; it faces it and, almost inconspicuously, denies this assumption. It works to eliminate gender from the conversation, by making it *absent* - the way characters are seen and presented is different than the norm, dialogue does not reflect comments on gender existence or hierarchy at all, and the ideology of gender norms is not built into character and plot design. Gender-absent narratives do not use the norm/anti-norm as the central problem/solution of women's narrative - women are already situated in subject-ness, and there is no necessity to move towards agency, as there is no restriction to agency in relation to gender. Gender-absent narratives skip past this problem/solution and go straight into allowing any gender to fulfill any narrative that fits the storyline.

Where the gender-apparent narratives keep the norm/anti-norm binary of gender norms, the gender-absent narratives seem to move in and out of the binary. Jolles suggests that, when we are facing the idea of norms and how we grapple with them, she "envision[s] working at the edge of normalization to entail a highly dynamic, back-and-forth movement between working with and working against norms...to better identify and expand normalization's edges" (2012, 305), arguing that we should not be attempting this 'transcendence' from the norm into the anti-norm. This play can truly embrace the possibilities of fiction while reconfiguring primary world concepts into secondary worlds and encouraging a new presentation of 'what *could* go with whom'; this moving around the edges is something that could be a space for opening up an oppressive system. This

movement would refuse the norm/anti-norm as being the only problem/solution in relation to the gender binary, or to any gender system; instead, gender-absent narratives would provide a play at the 'normative edges,' that creates space for audiences to understand and imagine a new possibility.

Consider Galadriel in Amazon's *The Rings of Power*. She is a commander and a warrior, she is an extremely powerful being, she is aesthetically beautiful, and, outside of her armor, she wears femininely-coded clothing; she is written to maneuver around the normative binary by playing in and outside of it. Most importantly, though, her story arc rests on a narrative of revenge for her brother's death, and there is no point throughout the series where her gender is mentioned; there is no questioning of her agency, nor of her capabilities and there are no comments on whether or not she can achieve what she sets out to do due to some assumed characteristics in relation to her gender. Her narrative rests on non-gendered problem/solution design - in fact, all of the characters in the show avoid the gendered problem/solution narrative. Conceptually, there is no gender overtly discussed or verbalized in the show, whatsoever.

We may also consider Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* in this category, as Le Guin played with androgyny in a way that disrupted the way that gender was presented in speculative fiction. The world Le Guin designed - Gethen - has 'ambisexual' inhabitants, wherein their sex is not fixed, and changes during reproduction. Le Guin expressed that the intention of the novel was to eliminate gender and 'see what was next'; though the book directly discusses gender, it does so in a reconfigured manner which, again, embraces the possibilities of gender systems through the depiction in a secondary world.

The idea, of course, is not to *necessarily* eliminate the existence of gender from narratives: it is not to remove womanhood from media, nor is it an attempt to create 'only non-binary characters' or some other critical assumption that misses the point. Rather, it is to eliminate the *necessity* of the gender binary - identification with a gender is not removed in this. Le Guin removed primary world gender as a system, but still addresses it in a different configuration, and Galadriel and the other characters of *The Rings of Power* are still gendered (by our perspective) in terms of clothing or presentation. It is still there, it is just not a component of the problem/solution plot design.

Just as with gender-apparent narratives, we can find both detriments and benefits to this type of narrative. A detriment that we may see in gender-absent narratives is that it may function to undermine the benefit of representation or reflection of one's self in a character on the screen that someone may identify with. If a viewer or consumer is particularly engaged with characters *because* of the way they see themselves in the character *in relation* to their gender and the way it is presented in a familiar gender system, then this elimination of gender from the conversation *may* hinder their ability to connect or get something from the connection to the character - though I remain mostly unconvinced of this being a major hindrance.

In parallel, in terms of benefit, gender-absent narratives may allow for a deeper connection to characters that are of a different identification (at least visually) than a viewer. Those with opposite or different identifications may be able to connect without having an identity connection and gain something from that connection that they wouldn't have gotten if gender was a central component - e.g., would young boys connect with Rhaenyra if her gender wasn't central but rather her ability to ride dragons, or her friendship with Alicent Hightower, or something else? The greatest benefit, though, comes in undermining the idea of the gender binary being *inherent*. If we are able to propose a different way to format a secondary world, as Le Guin or the producers of *The Rings of Power* do (whether intentionally or not), that is not built with gender binary norms of our primary world, then we can present the possibility of something different. If we are able to present a secondary world with structures different from the norm of our primary world, then we must confirm that the gender binary is necessarily constructed, not inherent, and we can play with it in both secondary and primary worlds. Playing seems the imperative term here because we may not be able to escape the entrenchment of the gender binary and its oppressive norms enough to fully abandon it in our primary world, and believing that we can, would likely lead us back into the 'fantasy of transcendence' that will fail us either way. But, to see possibility in our secondary worlds is to see a space for that same possibility in our primary world.

Conclusion

To conclude - my aim of this piece was to not only detail the possibilities of the method of 'reading between worlds,' but to also provide additional concepts in understanding the differences between narratives and how they may impact individuals in our primary world. I see speculative fiction as our modern myth system - the ways that tropes and characters and narratives are repeated in different formats across mass media at a global level seems exceptionally important when considering the stereotypes and detrimental representations incorporated into this mythology, especially with this myth often stemming from dominant hermeneutical resources. Using secondary world fiction to pursue new possibilities can inspire social growth, but there is a deep necessity to understand what is being referenced in the development of new worlds, and what we transfer over from the primary world that may be perpetuating certain detrimental biases or stereotypes. In this piece, I focused on gender narratives - particularly *main character* women's narratives - but I see this method as being deployable for the analysis of sexuality, race, class, and other pieces of marginalized identity. These three concepts - gender-apparent, gender-insinuated, and gender-absent - can easily be adapted to reflect other experiences of marginalized groups, with likely different outcomes and insights. I hope that the detailing of these three concepts and the methodology of 'reading between worlds' can assist in a deeper understanding of the impact of our narrative fiction.

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