

ANNA BARK PERSSON

Home and Hell:

Representations of Female Masculinity in Action-Driven Science
Fiction Literature

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to examine the representation of female masculinity in genre literature. Reading female masculinity as queer embodiment, I put two science fictional texts driven by a typical action narrative in dialogue with earlier research on representations of female masculinity in literature and popular culture to demonstrate the importance of bringing the genre of the text into the analysis when examining female masculinity.

In the article, I use the connection between female masculinity and tragedy as my starting point to exemplify how the genre of a text shapes the depiction and reading of female masculinity. In the action-driven science fiction texts I study, this link is very much present, but tragedy is given another role to play. Instead of being an element in the constitution of gender non-conforming as an unlivable experience, the representation of these masculine female heroes as oriented away from heteronormative constructions of a good life (Ahmed 2006) *makes possible* the depiction of these women as masculine, as well as the glorification of their gender non-conformity within the framework of the action-based SF narrative.

Keywords: female masculinity, science fiction, action heroes, queer reading, genre literature

IN THIS ARTICLE, I examine the representation of female masculinity in action-driven science fiction stories. Most inquiries into the depiction, representation and formulation of female masculinity in literature and popular culture have focused on realist and self-biographical narratives, and not seldomly on how female masculinity is produced as a tragic subject position (Detloff 2006). The aim of this article is to signal the importance of examining conceptions of female masculinity outside of realist narratives and, by extension, to understand how narrative and genre conventions become instrumental in representations of female masculinity.

Female Masculinity in Literature and Popular Culture

Literature and popular culture are and have been important sites for the study of female masculinity, both as a historical/materialist phenomenon and subject position, and as a cultural representation. Scholars have examined female masculinity in self-biographical novels by self-identified masculine women and transmen (Halberstam 1998; Noble 2004; Detloff 2006); through the evolving image of the tomboy in American literature and culture (Abate 2008); as a particular cultural motif with queer possibilities (Holmqvist 2017); or used female masculinity as a way of queer reading (Björklund 2016). With few exceptions (Sommerland 2012), these readings of female masculinity have focused on realist and self-biographical texts and media, and when action and science fiction are brought up as examples, as in Jack Halberstam's discussion of *Aliens* (1986), the depiction of female masculinity is not really put in relation to the specific genre framework of the story.

From the perspective of action film and science fiction criticism, on the other hand, masculinity is often a central aspect in the discussion of female characters within the genre.

However, these discussions are mostly focused on how the female characters' supposed intrinsic femininity iconographically and narratively navigates the masculinity inherent in the action hero role and how this ties into the portrayal of a credible action heroine that is at the same time appealing to the presumed straight male audience (Tasker

1993a; Melzer 2006; Stuller 2010; Brown 2011). These discussions rarely engage with queer theoretical understandings of female masculinity. My objective here is to merge these two perspectives, to examine how female masculinity is depicted and formulated within action-driven SF and how this depiction engages with the generic framework of these stories, from the viewpoint of female masculinity as a specific way of doing and embodying gender.

Female Masculinity

Female masculinity, like all other ways of doing gender, is an unstable and complex gender category. While my focus is on explicitly queer female-bodied women performing masculinity, “female masculinity” covers a large range of differing subject positionings, bordering to and intersecting with the categories of transmen, genderqueer and gender-fluid people, drag kings, and androgyny (Halberstam 1998; Noble 2004; Hanson 2007). Here, I use Halberstam’s formulation of female masculinity as masculinity embodied by a female subject, generally but not necessarily concurring with queer sexuality (Halberstam 1998). Put in terms of the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990), female masculinity covers those female-bodied subjects whose gender presentation is masculine rather than feminine and whose desire often diverges from heterosexuality. How female masculinity is lived as well as read and received intersects with categories such as sexuality, race, class, and ability/disability (Halberstam 1998; Noble 2004).

Not all gender non-conforming women are comfortable with the term or use it (Kuru-Utumpala 2013). It has been criticized for re-inscribing gender non-conformity into a binary register and ignoring how identities are made up of *both* feminine and masculine characteristics, rather than one or the other (Paechter 2006). I use it because it covers both female masculinity as a gender identity and acknowledges that there are women who actively identify as masculine. It also provides a tool of analysis that makes visible what effects a female subject’s performance of masculinity may have. Furthermore, it is less bound to a particular way of doing female masculinity than for example “butch,” and thus

affords more maneuverability. (“Butch” would also be an anachronism here, since it is not used in my material.)

It is important to note that female masculinity is seldom seen as a proper or genuine way of doing masculinity. Rather it is “generally received by hetero- and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach” (Halberstam 1998, 9). Being female-bodied and performing masculinity is often perceived as a way of doing gender wrong: “Because masculinity is a sign of privilege in our society [...] girls who exhibit masculine behavior [...] are punished not only because their femininity is in jeopardy but also because masculinity has been reserved exclusively for male bodies” (Halberstam 1999, 164). Female masculinity then, is not only considered an untenable position from a gender normativity point of view, but also intimately intertwined with the question of gendered power.

Madelyn Detloff, in her exploration of three of the most fundamental works in queer theoretical discussions of female masculinity – *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and the film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) – argues that suffering and tragedy remain the most prominent markers of butch and FTM narratives in Western culture. In her view the way that these narratives tie butch embodiment so intimately to tragedy seems to deny the possibility of constructing livable realities outside of gender conforming: “the tragic structure of [...] these narratives seem to imply that female masculinity is something of an inescapable tragedy in itself” (Detloff 2006, 97).

It is this link between female masculinity, tragedy, and narrative I examine here. I argue that the placement and function of suffering and tragedy in relation to female masculinity is highly dependent upon the genre framework of the text and the role tragedy plays in the depiction of female masculinity. The aim of this article is twofold: to argue that it is important to take the genre framework of the story into consideration when examining female masculinity in cultural texts, and to highlight the importance of going outside realist and self-biographical texts to understand the place and function of female masculinity in the Western cultural landscape.

Science fiction is particularly suitable for this examination. By its very nature it is a genre where everything is supposedly possible, and, as many feminist and queer SF scholars have theorized, it provides a productive space to re-think gender, sexuality, and embodiment in radical and subversive ways (Barr 1987; Rose 1994; Pearson 2008; Merrick 2011). In this article, I am mostly interested in this, in a sense, *unrealized* potential – why has this connection between gender non-conformity and tragedy and violence been retained even in these far-away futures where any kind of “natural” gendered body has already been displaced by the binary-disrupting cyborg body (Haraway 1991)? I have discussed the depiction of female masculinity in relation to the science fictional framework in the texts more comprehensibly elsewhere (Bark Persson 2017). In this discussion, I will primarily focus on the SF framework as a backdrop that makes subversions of gender, sexuality and embodiment possible through its non-realistic mode.

Narratives of Struggle: Action and the Heroic Body

Compared to the vast and varied field of SF, action narratives adhere to a more obviously set formula and are primarily constructed to show off and glorify the muscular body of their hero: “The body of the hero [...] represents almost the last certain territory of the action narrative [...]” (Tasker 1993b, 241). The main point of the plot is to provide the hero with a setting in which his body can become a spectacle – a hazardous, naturalized location where survival hinges upon the hero’s lethally trained, muscular body. The action genre’s “imaginary geography mobilises two key terms: *home* and *hell*” in a way that entwine and exchange them: hell becomes home and vice versa in the depiction of the action hero (ibid., 98, emphasis in original).

Like female masculinity, the male action hero has a complicated relationship to the question of gendered power. Class is a central, albeit often implicit, part of the way the action hero is depicted as turning away from such institutions as the military, the police, or the government, but in the action film this working-class-coded body is mainly used to reinscribe the “naturalness” of male power in the male body in the face of

patriarchal anxiety and a supposed loss of societal power (Jeffords 1993, 247, 257–258). The action hero is depicted as an expandable instrument, dispatched at someone else’s command in ways that “express the powerlessness of the ‘ordinary soldier’” while at the same time used to emphasize “the figure of the muscular hero, an extraordinary soldier” (Tasker 1993a, 100). While action narratives rarely depict the specific struggles of marginalized groups, “they nonetheless powerfully dramatise the fact of struggle” (ibid., 166). They play off the terror of powerlessness by imbuing the body, and the experience of being a subject reduced to *being* a body, with spectacular glory – the action hero triumphs through the sheer force and use of his body. Action and its fantastic depiction of physical power may thus function as a site of escapism for an audience that leads a restricted life (ibid., 126–127). Valerie Walkerdine argues that the ever-present and glorified violence in these stories “relates not only to masculinity, but also to lived oppression, to the experience of powerlessness and the fear of it” (Walkerdine 1986, 192). Here, I read the action story as a narrative of struggle that can provide a productive space for queer embodiment and representation.

Queer Embodiment

Where most discussions of the masculinization of the female body in action narratives have emerged from semiotic perspectives, I want to add the dimension of the masculine female body as a lived subject position. For this, I turn to queer phenomenology.

In an article on butch embodiment, Athena Nguyen (2008), under the sub-heading “Throwing like a butch,” maps out a phenomenological approach to butch embodiment that fleshes out Iris Marion Young’s classic phenomenological account of female modality, “Throwing Like a Girl” (1998). Nguyen’s point is that butch embodiment generally engages with the body and its positioning in the world in ways different than the norm, by taking up space and otherwise comporting their bodies in a manner seen as unfeminine. That is not to say that butches stand outside the disciplining of female bodies according to Young, but that they are affected by it in a different way (ibid., 671).

This suggests that comporting one's body in an unfeminine manner as a woman is to take up space in a queer way. According to Sara Ahmed, sexual orientation is a way of being oriented also in a spatial and temporal sense: "The fantasy of a natural orientation is an orientation device that organizes worlds around the form of the heterosexual couple, as if it were from this 'point' that the world unfolds" (Ahmed 2006, 85). Bodies are seen to be naturally made to fit into this constellation, and through this fantasy of the natural, lines are paved that orient and shape bodies in accordance to them. Through this process certain bodies are made to be at home, while others become out of place. The lines of heteronormativity move us towards the reproduction of the heterosexual nuclear family and away from queer alternatives; the body is not only the site of our experience of the world, but also the way through which we become oriented towards certain kinds of lifelines – while we are oriented away from alternatives through the way they are constructed as not worth living. Certain orientations and positionings are more readily accessible and more easily lived than others. Ahmed's concept of queer phenomenology focuses on sexuality, but here I extend that to include gender identity (c.f. Bremer 2011, 42) in order to understand female masculinity as something with a specific bodily orientation in space.

Material and Method

My material consists of two trilogies marketed as SF literature with female protagonists arguably more masculine than the typically 'tough chick' action heroine: The Spin Trilogy by Chris Moriarty – *Spin State* (2004), *Spin Control* (2006), *Ghost Spin* (2013) – and The Bel Dame Apocrypha by Kameron Hurley – *God's War* (2011), *Infidel* (2012), *Rapture* (2013). All six novels have a similar premise: an object with the potential to change the entirety of the posthuman, space-faring futures of the trilogies is introduced, whereupon the hero is dispatched by an institutional power to handle this object in a way that maintains the status quo and a battle for control of the object ensues. Both narratives focus primarily on the way the hero is caught up in the great intergalactical conflicts that the hero must help solve. The heroes in question are Major

Catherine Li (*The Spin Trilogy*) and Nyxnissa so Dasheem (*The Bel Dame Apocrypha*). They are both the undisputed heroes of their respective stories and portrayed as masculine women – queer, racialized and cyborgs – and both turn away from their respective institutions – the military and the government – in their narrative arcs towards the harsh, “natural” settings of the desert (Nyx) and outer space (Li).

In short, they are examples of queer, masculine female protagonists – still a rare fare in most media, including (feminist) SF. Furthermore, both series have been critically acclaimed not only as SF novels, but also as queer and feminist works: Hurley was included on the honor list for the Tiptree Award – an award given to speculative fiction that explores and challenges normative concepts of gender and sexuality – while Moriarty’s books have been finalists for both the Gaylactic Spectrum Award and the Lambda Literary Award.

I approach my texts via queer reading, a deconstructive reading focused on examining how heteronormativity and queerness are discursively constructed in cultural texts. A queer reading is a politically motivated, intertextual enterprise that weaves texts, politics, bodies, and their cultural contexts together (Karkulehto 2012, 26–27). Maria Margareta Österholm, drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of reparative readings, argues that a different method than the typical paranoid optic focused on “tracking” and “revealing” hidden discourses of power, queerness, and homophobia, is needed to analyze texts in which queerness is not subtextual but rather overflows the text (Österholm 2012, 91–93). Wendy Pearson suggests a similar method for queer readings of science fiction, arguing that SF is always potentially queer and that queer readings of SF thus need to acknowledge the possibilities present in the genre for re-writing our culturally held assumptions about sex, gender, sexuality, and bodies (Pearson 2008, 16). The aim of my reading, then, is not to bring the queerness out in the text, but rather to examine the queerness that is already in evidence and its possible effects – to read with the text, rather than against it.

In my reading of female masculinity in relation to genre and narrative form, I further draw on structuralist ideas about textual meaning

as located in the systematic and schematic construction of narrative and genre form (Ornega 2006, 266, 274). However, while “adher[ing] to the conventions of epic world-building” to some extent makes SF a conservative genre (Csicsery-Ronay 2008, 82), a comprehensive and rigid genre framework can simultaneously function as “perversely liberat[ing]” in that it “is about rules, and therefore about rule violations, so queerness is always one of its possible subtexts” (Balay 2012, 924). Thus, I understand my material as genre texts that follow certain formulaic conventions, the breaking *and* observing of which can both allow for queer subversion.

Queer Textual and Bodily Orientations

According to Halberstam, female masculinity is easy to recognize, but pinpointing exactly what constitutes it is harder (Halberstam 1998, xi, 268). I would argue that Nyx and Li emerge as masculine women primarily in two ways: through being depicted as inhabiting the world bodily in a manner not in line with femininity and the heteronormative disciplining of women, and through being continuously positioned in opposition to the conventional image of the action heroine.

The first line of *The Bel Dame Apocrypha* (Hurley 2011, 5) reads: “Nyx sold her womb somewhere [...] on the edge of the desert.” Li is similarly barren, not by choice, but by design; she is a clone, artificially made, but shows no regret over this throughout the story. It would be easy to read this formulation of female masculinity as a rejection of womanhood, the female body, and motherhood. It also seems to suggest a decisive split between body and mind: the body not so much embodied as inhabited, a chunk of meat-as-machine, the parts of which can be bought, sold, bartered and replaced indiscriminately, endlessly flexible and controllable, with little to no agency or value except as a tool or resource.

I want instead to consider this as a way of signaling a break with the need of the action heroine to maintain a balance between femininity and masculinity. “Women are women insofar as they are oriented toward men and children,” Ahmed writes (Ahmed 2006, 85), and by extension, bodies that move away from this are understood as deviant and

queer. Nyx's hysterectomy, then, can be understood as less of a rejection than a turning away from not just femininity but also the "powerful technology" of orientation (ibid.) that produces the womb-having body with aspirations towards childbearing as the obviously natural and normal female body. What Nyx turns away from is not her own body, but rather the heteronormative, reproductive imperative that demands that the female body should be and perform in a certain way.

Jeffrey A. Brown argues that one of the main characteristics of action heroines is their transformational potential – they upset and complicate gender categories because they move between them. In many of the films he discusses, the plot itself hinges upon this transformation from conventional femininity to hypermasculinity. In others, the appeal of the heroine is instead built precisely out of the clash of her hyperfeminine and hypermasculine attributes (Brown 2011, 49–50, 55). While this holds true for many science fictional texts as well, especially where they intersect narratively with some kind of action or adventure story, this kind of transformation can also take on an additional function. Women like Nyx and Li are not wholly a new figure in SF: the dystopian scenario of man-like women ruling the world is one with a long history within the genre. Nowadays, matriarchal societies are usually envisioned by feminist writers, but in the past masculine female characters have generally been brought to life by male authors in stories where they revel in matriarchal power, lesbianism, and masculinity until they ultimately fall in love with a man, become proper feminine women, and help restore the world to its rightful order by (re)instating patriarchy (Russ 1980; Merrick 2003). For Nyx and Li, however, the move away from foundational femininity is located elsewhere, in the generic framing of the story. Nyx getting rid of her womb is for her not a transformational movement from femininity to masculinity; the turn away from conventional femininity it signals is a way of showing that Nyx is not the kind of female hero generic convention has led us to expect, that she inhabits her female body in a way that departs from heterosexist understandings of what the female body is and what it is for. In order to make this point, both authors continuously stage the *supposed*

contradiction of a female body and the performance of masculinity in relation to both genre conventions and bodily orientation in space. This correlates with how Hanson notes that drag kinging “requires, *or indeed desires*, the evocation of the female body as a specifically gendered and sexual ‘object’ (at both a bodily and representational level), in order to be meaningful” (Hanson 2007, 68, emphasis in original).

This becomes very prevalent through the presence of the male gaze, which here does not passivize Nyx and Li as objects (Mulvey 1975), but rather the opposite. The first description the reader gets of Nyx is also the first time Rhys – her eventual almost lover and, following the logic of the action narrative, designated damsel in distress – sees her, in a boxing ring:

She was as tall as he was, broad in the shoulders and heavy in the chest and hips [...] She put both her hands on the ropes and leaned forward, looking him straight in the face. The boldness of the look stopped him in his tracks. He didn’t know if she wanted to cut him or kiss him [...] A broad smile lit up Nyx’s face. It made her almost handsome. (Hurley 2011, 46–47)

Nyx’s “broad,” bulky body not only diverges from the typical body of the action heroine and conventional feminine modality, but is also something that draws Rhys in; the safety her bodily strength promises is what attracts Rhys to her: “[S]he clasped his elbow [...] in that one moment, that brief embrace, he felt safe for the first time in more than a year” (ibid., 47). Li is similarly described through the eyes of men to emphasize her masculinity as located in her physically strong body – her husband looks at her and sees her “[standing] there like the rock she was, arms crossed over her chest, brow knit, lips pursed, nodding intently,” while another man immediately interprets her as “a soldier out of uniform; he read it in the cut of her hair, the set of her shoulders, the decisive moments of someone who actually knew how to hit people” (Moriarty 2007, 253, 63). The male gaze is occasionally also utilized in a more traditional manner. When a male teammate and past lover

of Nyx's sees her wounded he "realized he liked her this way, mostly helpless and incredibly vulnerable," even as he thinks that she will soon "rebound [...] go back to swaggering around" (Hurley 2011, 184). A male acquaintance of Li's cannot help but think "it might be fun to see how the formidable Catherine Li looked when she wasn't in control of things. Which was completely crazy, because she wasn't the kind of woman you picked up and put down at will. She was the kind who picked you up and put you down" (Moriarty 2013, 360). The possibility of the passivizing male gaze is introduced, only to be shut down by the impossibility of Nyx and Li embodying such a role.

The body is central in the depiction of Li and Nyx as masculine. More precisely, the depiction of Li and Nyx as masculine is very much dependent upon physical power – specifically on their being stronger and more capable than men. When attempting to seduce Li, a woman runs her hands across Li's body and asks how strong she is and when Li simply replies, "Strong," she prompts, "'Stronger than a man?' 'A lot stronger,' Li said." (Moriarty 2004, 355) The action hero role demands a certain amount of strength and masculinization, but what Hurley and Moriarty are doing here is not simply depicting Nyx and Li as masculine enough to 'pass muster.' Rather, I would argue that the texts are actively breaking both generic and gendered boundaries in the depiction of their heroes and *taking pleasure* in it by having fun with positing Nyx and Li as stronger and more capable than the men around them. This is particularly visible in the romantic and sexual relationships with men both Nyx and Li engage in. Female masculinity is generally understood as something belonging to lesbianism – even as for example Noble (2004) also understands it as being formed in close relation to men and male masculinity – but here both women's romantic and sexual relationships with men become central in the depiction of them as masculine in an evident play with the gendered structures of the action narrative.

However, men also play other roles in this depiction. In *Spin State*, Li is admiring her muscular body in the mirror while working out – a habit described as "her one vanity" (Moriarty 2004, 273). She is joking with

a male friend about how he could have her body if he would only put in the work, when she is interrupted by another man challenging her to a sparring match. It soon spirals into an outright fight and, at one point, Li throws him: “The flash of anger in his eyes were unmistakable, but he recovered his balance and attitude quickly. ‘Nice trick,’ he said. ‘Guess you didn’t just sleep your way to the top.’ ‘Wouldn’t you like to know?’ Li answered, resisting the urge to stomp on his fingers” (ibid., 278).

The man’s hostility and jab about Li sleeping her way to the rank of major is not just inter-soldier rivalry, but also an attempt to put her in place, to re-inscribe her body (and career) into a feminine register and punish her for embodying the masculinity that should be the privileged domain of his male body (Halberstam 2004). In a scene where Li is admiring her masculine body and its strength compared to that of the men around her, she is suddenly interrupted by this reminder of how turning from femininity towards masculinity as a female subject is to be subject to (violent) gender disciplining, which abruptly moves Li out of the place she a moment ago was so comfortably at home in.

“No going home”: Female Masculinity and Orientation in Space

“Depending on which way one turns, different worlds might even come into view,” Ahmed writes. Orientation is never casual, but takes “subjects in different directions” (Ahmed 2006, 15). A turning away from something is always just as much an orientation towards other kinds of objects. The turning away from compulsory femininity is literally mirrored in the narrative structure of the texts in the way Nyx and Li move through geographical and metaphorical space on their quests. This means that the protagonists are put into almost constant movement, and this movement is in itself an orientation towards *the very act of turning away*.

This is exemplified through the way in which they both relate to their childhood homes. Nyx and Li have left their actual homes behind in ways that have barred any chances of going back – in fact, even when Li does return to the planet where she grew up, she hardly remembers it; years of space travel have chipped away at her memory. She manages

to track down her mother, though, and when this woman Li hardly remembers tells her of her life with her new family, Li realizes that “it wasn’t a bridge she was building between them with her words, but a wall. Whatever common ground the two of them might once have traveled, [...] Li’s life was now a foreign country from which no road led back [...] There was no going home” (Moriarty 2004, 516). Li is so firmly turned away from her past and childhood home that even when she is physically present in the place where she grew up, her life is completely diverged from where she came from, with no option of going back. In a similar way, Nyx is unable to return to any idea of a childhood home since her family, save her sister, is long dead. Indeed her sister’s sole function in *God’s War* is to be gruesomely murdered in order to sever Nyx’s only remaining connection to her familial home.

According to Ahmed, “The background would be understood as that which must take place in order for something to appear [...] a background is what explains the conditions of emergence or an arrival of something as the thing that it appears to be in the present” (Ahmed 2006, 37–38). The background can be both spatial and temporal – it can refer to the way a body or an object is oriented in space as well as through the story of a life. Ahmed shows how the queer body always arrives as out of joint in heterosexual spaces and considers the family in particular as one of those spaces (Ahmed 2006). The “background” provided to Nyx and Li’s adventures, then, is not simply the lost connection to their homes and original families, but also the marking of these spaces; they are ordered by the logic of heteronormativity and generational history and therefore unable to encompass Nyx and Li, whose queer bodies and sexualities have broken the “straight line” of heterosexual reproduction (Ahmed 2006; see also Halberstam 2006).

The estrangement from concepts like “home” and “family” emerges not only when these concepts are synonymous with heteronormativity: in *Rapture*, the home that Nyx leaves behind in the beginning of the story is not a heterosexual marriage, but one made up of her girlfriend Radeyah, her teammate Anneke and Anneke’s children, whom they raise communally. Nyx does not leave voluntarily, but under the threat

that they will all be killed should she refuse. However, her decision is imbued with a sense of inevitability – on hearing the job offer, Nyx “felt something flutter inside of her, something that had been dead a good long time” (Hurley 2012, 8), and when Anneke tells her that Radeyah will understand given that she knows who Nyx is, Nyx morbidly replies, “Nobody really knows who I am [...] Not until I put a bullet in their head” (ibid., 9). And with that Nyx is off, back into the desert.

Worth noting here is that Nyx’s home country is a matriarchal society, where women-only households – based on love, sex, friendship, blood relations, or a combination thereof – are normative, and female masculinity is if not common then at least widely accepted. At one point a woman from a patriarchal culture wistfully thinks back on her time in Nasheen, where “women decided how they wanted to be treated. They policed it. Enforced it. Was there a way to do that without becoming monstrous like them [...]?” (Hurley 2014, 137). While she covets the inalienable rights women enjoy in Nasheen, what those rights bring with them or what makes them possible – lesbianism and gender non-conformity – is deemed too steep a price. Nyx, then, is continuously brought away from the place where her sexuality and gender identity is normative to where her masculinity is interpreted as monstrous, and her failure to conform to expectations of femininity is repeatedly emphasized in the way she interacts with, and is oriented in relation to, both people and space.

It seems that for female masculinity to be read, it must somehow be imbued or associated with failure and loss and placed in a context where it can be interpreted as a way of doing gender wrong. I would argue, however, that unlike in Detloff’s (2006) material, tragedy here does not function only as a marker of female masculinity and gender non-conformity, but also as a way of positioning Nyx and Li in relation to the action narrative. Their continuous movement towards and through the desert or outer space is not only an orientation from home and family, but also from spaces imbued with the markers of “civilization” towards the “natural” setting described by Yvonne Tasker (1993a) as the narrative space where the action hero can be displayed and glorified.

Home and Hell: Glorifying Female Masculinity

Nyx and Li and their non-conforming bodies are not simply out of place in spaces constructed as home for bodies that follow the straight line (Ahmed 2006) – rather, they become outright disruptive. When Nyx arrives in Tirhan, a country not partaking in the war, she visits Rhys. Rhys has come up in the world since he left Nyx’s team: he has a stable government job, has married a (properly feminine) woman, and had children. His body is here encompassed by his social context and therefore made comfortable and at home (Ahmed 2006). Nyx, by contrast, is disoriented: “In Tirhan, Nyx could not smell the war [...] Tirhan was big and green and rolling, and as they descended into the grasses into the valley below, Nyx found herself suddenly claustrophobic [...]” (Hurley 2014, 184). The disorientation increases when she steps into Rhys’ house, clearly framed as a referent for the heteronormative, middle-class comfort the family enjoys. Rhys is thrilled to be able to show Nyx his new power and stability, and that he has “replaced” her “with something else [...] His own strength, his own resolve. In a peaceful country he did not need a woman like Nyx to protect him” (ibid., 208). The balance of power is inverted – for Rhys back to its rightful state, for Nyx into unknown territory. She is obviously “out of line” in the domestic heterosexuality of Rhys’ house, something which is demonstrated further by Rhys’ wife taking the chance to tell Nyx that she is “much uglier than I expected” (ibid., 217).

Only forty pages later, that changes. Rhys and his family are attacked by a group of Nasheenan women. Rhys and his wife are seriously wounded, their children killed, and suddenly Rhys *does* need Nyx: “Nyx would come for them. She would come. She would pull [his wife] and his daughters from the well. She would stop the bleeding. She would pick him up in her strong arms [...] Please, God, let her come back to me” (ibid., 248). Rhys doesn’t merely want to get out of a difficult situation by any means necessary. He wants to quite literally be “pick[ed] up in [Nyx’s] strong arms” and for her to “come back to” *him* specifically. Their relationship of hero and damsel in distress is thus reestablished, and Nyx’s status as a hero is restored.

This narrative juxtaposition, of Nyx and Li moving from the position of reviled outsider to that of valued hero, is something that recurs throughout the novels, and is marked as specifically place-bound. Nyx does not manage to save Rhys that night and his life shatters. They do not cross paths again until the next installment, where they meet in the desert. The desert is hellish for both of them, but it is a hell where Nyx thrives, despite – or because of – the constant mortal danger, hunger, draught, gargantuan insects, and traitorous team-members. Rhys is not thriving. He has lost contact with his family after losing his job and has accidentally ended up indentured to the man Nyx is hunting. When they meet, Nyx asks him, “Is it that you have to take care of her out there? But out here –” she carefully moved her hand to his neck, lightly, as if by accident [...] ‘Out here, I take care of *you*’” (Hurley 2012, 322, emphasis in original). Again, there is the emphasis on space – the safety of the suburban home pitted against the open desert, where heteronormative structures are solidified and destabilized, respectively. This restates my reading of how the idea of the home as an object of heteronormativity is made out as the background to Nyx and Li’s orientation in the world, but also echoes the home-and-hell geography of the action narrative (Tasker 1993a).

Another way to look at this narrative juxtaposition would be to read how certain bodies become valuable in certain contexts, and not in others – or, to put it differently, how Nyx’ and Li’s masculine bodies move in and out of place depending on whether they have a purpose to fill or not. In *Ghost Spin*, Li is “downloaded” onto a spaceship as cheap cannon fodder by pirates boarding the ship. She wakes up, disoriented, to a man in a suit asking her to sign a mercenary contract. When she refuses, he hands her a hefty bill for “resurrection charges” (Moriarty 2013, 173). With no way to pay, she signs the contract forcing her to become an indebted soldier. Lying there in that tank, she is all but powerless. Just as the juxtaposition of Nyx and Rhys shows how the interlocking of masculinity and power is a complicated and context-bound, rather than static, tangle, Li’s masculinity and the power it enables her is contrasted with the “suit-and-tie-clad middle-management type” (ibid., 171) next to her.

When still in the tank, Li has no power and little choice but to comply. However, the minute she is out of it and “fully armed courtesy of her new employers” (ibid., 174), that changes. She starts cracking stupid jokes and critiquing their faulty pre-combat procedures as the man in the suit and the tech guys are panicking. When she is ready she makes “a gentle shooing gesture. ‘Go. Go off to wherever people like you go when actual shit goes down. I’m busy right now’” (ibid., 175). Against the apparatus of institutional, judicial power – represented by the middle-management man – Li is powerless, but as soon as she is battle-ready, gun in hand, that changes; suddenly it is Li that is in full control. Just as with Nyx, there is a striking opposition set up between the display of masculine power granted through social authority and masculine power as located within the muscular body – the very opposition the action narrative utilizes in its depiction of its heroes (Tasker 1993a).

Nyx and Li are primarily granted power and depicted as powerful in locations where their bodies are put to use in extreme and harsh environments and circumstances, and are framed by an action narrative that infuses these displays of spectacular physical feats and violence with glory. While tragedy and failure are interwoven into the depiction of them both, the action narrative allows for their non-normative bodies to be glorified. In other words, the use of bodily strength and violence in the portrayal of Nyx and Li within this narrative not only functions as a way for them to lay claim *to* masculinity, but also to *legitimize their non-normative bodies and identities*; it’s the only arena within these novels that the monstrous masculine female body can claim the value it is denied due to its failure and refusal to stay on the straight line (Ahmed 2006).

(Narrative) Conclusions

Near the end of *Ghost Spin*, Li’s character has been split in two as a consequence of sustained space travel. One of the Lis decides to abandon her mission and instead settle down with her husband. However, the character of Li seems yet again unable to fit into the heterosexual bliss promised by this happy ending; instead she inexplicably, with no explanation to the reader, shows up at the violent showdown that is the

story's climax and takes a bullet for the other Li. Thus, she abandons the happy heterosexual ending for one that secures both of them a *heroic* ending – a heroic death for herself, and the possibility of the continuation of the action narrative for the other Li. In the last line of the novel, Li is voicing her intentions: to “[b]egin at the beginning [...] and go on till you come to the end: then stop” (Moriarty 2013, 555). The last line of Hurley’s story reads, “‘I’m retired,’ Nyx said – to the ocean, to the air, to Nasheen, to her visitor – and took her last drink” (Hurley 2012, 379). Like Li’s comment, this suggests narrative circularity: she was retired at the start of the last novel as well, and that did not stop her from going on her bloodiest rampage yet. Both of these endings are deliberately ambiguous by simultaneously putting an end to the narrative action of the story, and keeping the possibility for further action open. This reflects the episodic character of the action narrative, where the ending must be left open to ensure that the spectacular action hero physicality remains untouched by the suggestion that it has or may have an end or breaking point (Tasker 1993a). Here, this episodic character also suggests a continued turning away from the spaces – civilization, home – marked as heteronormative and failing to encompass the masculine female body.

If the figure of the male hero turning or being turned away from civilization signals the reclaiming of a supposed loss of male power (Jeffords 1993), the figure of the queer, female hero doing the same holds different connotations. Framing the monstrous masculine woman within the action narrative allows for this monstrousness to instead be invested with value. In the depiction of Nyx and Li as masculine female heroes, the turning or being turned away from civilization mirrors the way their bodies are not encompassed by the skin of the social and heteronormative space and imbues this disorientation with glory through the fantasy of the physical strong and self-reliant action body. Within the logic of the action narrative, a hero is some one who has no need of being encompassed by a social community of any kind, and so the recurrent narrative of the masculine woman as a deviant, isolated figure instead becomes imbued with glory and is made into a heroic spectacle.

I am not arguing that these texts provide readers with livable alternatives and models for gender non-conformity, but rather that they provide glorified, larger-than-life masculine female heroes that challenge gendered depictions of both male and female action heroes. They do this by breaking the generic conventions of the action heroine and conforming with those of the action hero – which also in itself constitutes a break.

What I have argued in this article is that conventions of genre and narrative play a significant part in the representation of female masculinity in a given text. In the texts I have examined, the gendered tropes of the action narrative shape the constructions and depictions of female masculinity. This points to divergences in the depiction of female masculinity not only through its relation to its supposed inherent tragedy, on which I have focused here, but also through its relation to sexuality, men and male masculinity, and the ways through which female masculinity as such becomes readable. Thus, to understand the way female masculinity is represented and formulated in literature and popular culture, as well as what queer theory can learn and take from representations of female masculinity, the specific genre framework of the text needs to be taken into consideration. Here I have focused on two specific genres – the action narrative and, to a lesser extent, science fiction – that allow for particular ways of representing female masculinity, and shown how these affect the depiction and understanding of female masculinity. Further inquiries into how female masculinity engages with genre and formula in popular culture are needed to understand how female masculinity is conceptualized within Western media, what narrative spaces it fills, and what role it plays in the (re)production of (queer) gendered subjectivities and embodiment.

ANNA BARK PERSSON is a doctoral candidate in gender studies at Södertörn University, currently writing her PhD on Viking motifs in contemporary Anglophone fantasy literature. Her research interests include queer studies, (queer) masculinities, popular culture, genre literature, and queer temporalities.

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