

Power and the Gender Binary: Between Disruption and Reaffirmation

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the implications of gendered language within the narrative world of the fantasy book *Queen of Shadows* by Sarah J. Mass (2015). Gendered language reflects the expectations set upon the normative ideals of the gender binary, which itself is a system of power that is based on normalization and exclusion. This system is destabilized through disruptions. However, the disruption of gender expectations is not sufficient for the deconstruction of the gender binary itself. The analysis of the book's central female heroine will uncover how power negotiations are inherently linked to a binary gender system. Building an awareness towards gendered language presents the first step towards moving beyond the binary.

Introduction

1 Language and literature reflect societal structures, such as the gender binary, and can sensitize readers towards gender expansive language and representation. An analysis of such reflection, then, can enhance awareness of such normative ideals, and therefore build a basis for promoting change towards more inclusivity. In this paper, an analysis of the contemporary fantasy book *Queen of Shadows* by Sarah J. Maas (2015) presents an exemplary reading of what will be termed 'gendered language'. The analysis will show that the disruption of gender expectations is not sufficient for the disruption of the gender binary itself. A brief review of key terminology provides the basis of the analysis.

Justification of Texts

2 The selection of theoretical texts was dependent on their recent publication date, as well as on the inclusion of non-binary voices. The texts do not date back further than 2015, as the aim of this paper is to present the most recent discourse surrounding gender and the gender binary. Related to this is the late emergence of research on the non-binary gender identity, as well as the publication of works by openly non-binary researchers. This presents a research gap which itself poses challenges and limitations in the discussion of gender expansive language and representation (Richards et al. 1-3). With the aim to contribute to filling this gap, and to also give non-binary voices a platform, works published before 2015 were excluded from this paper, as, for example, the works by Judith Butler.

3 The choice of literary text was reliant on its readership and the genre-dependent narrative norms and possibilities of fantasy literature. This genre both re-imagines and re-iterates societal structures, including the possibility of magic to the discourse around gender expectations and gendered power relations. Usually set in patriarchal structures, fantasy literature negotiates gendered power relation on the axis between magical and political power. While the genre of fantasy literature was initially not dominated by women writers (Duncan

234), today fantastic young adult literature celebrates female authors such as Cassandra Clare, V. E. Schwab, or Holly Black. Sarah J. Maas herself is a *New York Times* bestselling author and her books have sold millions of copies and have been published in over thirty-seven languages (“Sarah J. Maas”). Fantastic writing by women writers is significant as it “addresses women's frustration with a system that has for so long worked to exclude them” (Duncan 234-5), and challenges normative systems and their production of truth (234). Therefore, these texts do not only uncover processes of naturalization, but also provide alternative positions to these normative ideals (Donner 340; Luck 175-6). However, the negotiation of power within fantasy literature also reaffirms a binary gender system (Clark 249; Donner 339) and does not undermine the gender binary itself.

4 In that regard, Maas presents a fantasy world with strong female characters in a largely patriarchal society and how they acquire, negotiate, and maintain political power. Uncovering how her central female heroine undermines gender expectations and uses normative ideals to her advantage presents how reading gendered language presents the first step in destabilizing gendered ideals. However, it will become clear how a disruption of gender ideals is not sufficient in deconstructing the gender binary itself. An analysis of Maas’ work shows how gender is represented in a contemporary and non-academic context, and to what extent the subversion of gender expectations does not only disrupt but also reaffirm the gender binary. For the analysis, the fourth book of the *Throne of Glass* series (2012-18) is chosen, as the negotiation of gendered power relations is especially explicit in *Queen of Shadows* (2015): The book presents a turning point where the central female character rises from being a slave to reclaim her status as Queen, thus offering a fruitful basis for the analysis of gendered language and power negotiations.

Key Terminology

Gender Binary

5 An understanding of the gender binary needs to be established as the basic framework of the analysis. The gender binary is understood as a system of power that assumes the existence of two biological sexes, namely male and female, connected to two sets of normative ideals, namely masculine and feminine, which individuals are expected to fulfil (Darwin 330; McCann and Monaghan 7; Vaid-Menon 6). Therefore, the gender binary is both a means of normalization and exclusion: Gender identities and gender expression are regulated, and gender expansive individuals are excluded, their existence even negated (Darwin 319; McCann and

Monaghan 7; Vaid-Menon 49). As this system is built upon repression and power, disruptions, such as the non-binary gender identity, destabilizes these normative ideals.

Non-Binary Gender Identity

6 A clarification of the term ‘non-binary’ is necessary as it challenges the constructedness of the gender binary, and furthermore presents the binary as inherently linked with colonialism. So-called non-Western identities uncover that the gender binary is neither neutral nor natural, but subjective and arbitrary; some examples are *hijra* in South Asia, *waria* in Indonesia, *muxe* in Mexico, two-spirit among the Native American community, *machi* in Chile and Argentina, *metis* in Nepal (Dozono 428; McCann and Monaghan 175; Vaid-Menon 39). The non-binary identity thus reinforces the notion of alternative world views in contrast to so-called Western ideals.

7 Relevant here is also that the term ‘non-binary’ refuses both binary categorization and disrupts the notion of consistent categorization, in general (Darwin 330; Richards et al. 5; Stewart 67). Non-binary individuals may identify as having a fixed third gender, a fluid gender identity, or no gender at all (Richards et al. 5). Furthermore, they may view their non-binary identity as transgender, as the gender they identify as does not align with the gender they are assigned at birth. This elusiveness, together with the omnipresence of the gender binary, results in the need for non-binary individuals to continuously establish their identity and educate others of their existence (Bergmann 43; Darwin 327). A broader literary representation of this identity could therefore function as a subversion of both, colonialist ideals, and present power relations. Within the analysis, the terms ‘non-binary’ and ‘gender expansive’ will be used in order to reflect a broader variety of gender identities, including those who do not necessarily identify as non-binary.

Gendered Language

8 A discussion of the terms ‘language’ and ‘gendered language’ is required as well, as they are at the centre of the analysis. Language itself is a means of communicating experiences, as well as constructing and performing identities. Therefore, language can be both normative and liberating (Luck 100); it can reflect and reinforce societal structures and catalyse change (Luck 179; Richards et al. 3). Language and societal discourses are reciprocal, as language is always interpreted through existing narratives, and narratives are established and reinforced through language.

9 Gendered language, then, describes the whole set of gendered meaning attributed to gender performance, including appearance, manner of speaking, pronouns, power relations, among others, and is thus postulated and regulated by the gender binary (Hogan et al. 8; Luck

96; Smith and Smith 67; Vaid-Menon 30). Therefore, gender language is reciprocal towards societal expectations, as it is subjected to and influenced by normative ideals on the one hand, and maintains and reinforces them, on the other. Shaping awareness towards the implications of gendered language can facilitate future depictions of gender expansive identities. Within the present analysis, gendered language especially in terms of appearance and power negotiations is examined.

The Negotiation of Gendered Power Relations in *Queen of Shadows* (2015)

Disruption and Reaffirmation

10 The analysis will present an exemplary reading of gendered language, and in a further step illustrate that a disruption of gender norms and expectations is not sufficient to undermine the gender binary itself. Maas presents a monarchical world in which gendered power relations are negotiated by Aelin Galathynius, the lost Queen of Terrasen, who continuously acquires power, rising from working as a slave, to successfully defeating the assassins, the invading kingdom Adarlan, an army of demons, as well as the gods. Overall, Aelin shows herself to be highly aware of gendered expectations and uses those to her advantage, as well. The story is recounted from a third person perspective and is set in the fictional continent of Erilea with its various kingdoms. One of these kingdoms, namely Adarlan, invaded most of the other territories, including Terrasen. In Adarlan, Aelin is known under the pseudonym of Celaena Sardothien or Adarlan's Assassin, a persona her master Arobynn Hamel created to keep her identity a secret. Initially, Aelin fears reclaiming her heritage as she is ashamed for her inaction while she trains as an assassin under Arobynn's tutelage. However, through her training she acquires the skills necessary to re-establish her position as powerful player within a patriarchal society with conservative gender ideals and expectations.

11 During her training, Aelin learns to use exactly these expectations to her advantage as she observes that she is judged by her appearance: Especially her hair, eyes, and clothes play a major role, and Aelin uses her ability to read the gendered language assigned to her looks in her favour while navigating power relations. Aelin is known to be "a golden-haired young woman" (Maas 7), so much that dying her hair "a ruddy shade of brown" (133) makes her unrecognizable to most as they cannot "immediately identify" (34) her. She is thus defined by her hair and knows how to make the male characters' superficial evaluation advantageous to her plans. Another of Aelin's defining features are her eyes which are explicitly described as "turquoise-and-gold eyes" (144; 288). She is repeatedly recognized through her eyes, which presents a threat to her while staying in her enemy's court as her eyes are markers of her

heritage (245). The following quote exemplifies how both Aelin's eyes and hair mark her heritage and relation to her cousin Aedion:

She smiled, hoping the cosmetics she'd dabbed around her eyes would mute the turquoise and gold of her irises, and that the drab shade of blond she'd dyed her hair would disguise its near-identical hue with Aedion's. (541)

Aelin's wish not to be recognized as Aedion's relative, and thus the heir of Terrasen is foregrounded here; their shared eyes and hair are thus markers of their heritage and royalty. As both are currently situated in their adversary's kingdom, and as Aelin faces the King of Adarlan in this scene, disguising her defining features becomes pivotal to her survival. These qualities are in return markers for her position as Adarlan's biggest threat, the lost heir of Terrasen, and the ability to show her eyes and hair are tied with the degree of power she possesses in a given situation. Aelin's eyes are thus symbols of power and function as facilitators in her quest to amass more power for her court. In the patriarchal setting of this book, Aelin's long gold hair reaffirms the expectation placed on women to be beautiful, but vulnerable, and she effectively uses these expectations to her advantage, as she is by no means vulnerable, having trained as an assassin.

12 Throughout the fantasy series, then, Aelin's preoccupation with her hair as a sign of her status as a wealthy citizen of Rifthold increasingly transforms into a tool in her missions. This then highlights the preoccupation the male characters exhibit towards her hair especially – her appearance is reduced to her gold hair, and she goes unnoticed when she colours it either brown or another shade of blonde (133; 541). She therefore can use their expectations against them, especially their lack of consideration that she could change what is unanimously referred to as beautiful hair. Aelin disrupts gendered expectations, while at the same time the significance of her features is established and reinforced.

13 The gender binary is thus reflected in the discussion of Aelin's hair, as gendered expectations are exploited by Aelin, but the binary itself is not questioned. Thus, the feminization of long and beautiful hair as a gendered identity marker is not challenged, as Aelin draws power from her hair's appealing appearance exactly through the feminization her hair is subjected to. In a male-dominated environment of assassins and monarchs, Aelin can use her looks as a tool to deceive others from her abilities as a trained assassin, exploiting her apparent reaffirmation of the male characters' expectation to gain an advantage. Therefore, Aelin manipulates a patriarchal and monarchical society with exactly the gendered notions that are to mark her as inferior and vulnerable. She can use being underestimated to her advantage, and thus Aelin presents the self-imposed limits of patriarchy, that blinds itself by equating female beauty to vulnerability: Gendered power relations are grounded in strictly conservative gender

expectations, to such an extent that a disruption of the idea of a beautiful and vulnerable woman is not expected or anticipated. Therefore, the power Aelin draws here is nevertheless dependent upon the patriarchal society she is situated in, and she could not exploit gendered expectations as much if they were not as adamantly established to begin with. Aelin therefore reads and subverts the gendered language of hair here, which itself is based on a binary gender system that lends these gender expressions their power.

14 The society presented in the book naturalizes the “normative scripts” (Darwin 330) assigned to women and men. These ideals are understood as strict and consistent categories that justify male dominance over what are thought to be unanimously vulnerable and objectifiable women. And while Aelin can ‘read’ these scripts, her success is dependent upon the idea of only two existent genders. The gender binary as a system of power based on normalization and exclusion (Darwin 330; McCann and Monaghan 7; Vaid-Menon 6) is thus not essentially undermined within this book, however, the previously thought stable gender expectations are disrupted. In that regard, Aelin’s subversive exploitation of gendered expectations challenges the process of categorization and naturalization itself. Similarly, non-binary and gender expansive identities complicate the process of categorization, as well, and question the idea of a simple and consistent classification (Darwin 330; Richards et al. 5; Stewart 67). These identities themselves are characterized as ambiguous and dynamic (Richards et al. 5), and they complicate gendered expectations by not following normative ideals. Within this narrative economy, then, Aelin might disrupt gender ideals, but her actions do not generate gender expansiveness. Her actions thus uncover how power negotiations in a patriarchal society are inherently linked to a binary gender system. Aelin’s approach to navigating these power plays contribute to building an awareness towards the implications of gendered language.

Between But Not In-Between

15 The negotiation of power reflected by Aelin’s choice of clothes is equally disruptive and reaffirming of the gender binary at the same time, as they undermine the expectations set upon her, but reinforce binary relations. Aelin is aware that “[c]lothes are weapons, too” (Maas 241), and fluctuates between being “[d]ressed head to toe in black” (195) when she slips into her role as an assassin, and in exquisite “dresses and embroidered tunics” (241) when she negotiates power as a queen. While her assassin clothes are chosen for her, as well as her whole persona as the assassin Celaena Sardothien, Aelin herself favours exquisite and expensive dresses and finery, the preference of which can be read as both remnants of her former life, and indicators of her ‘queenliness’. As an assassin, her body, and indeed herself, are treated as possession:

As she headed for the bedroom, she could already sense the reinforcement added to every weak spot she possessed. The specifications must have been sent months before the suit arrived, by the man who did indeed know about the knee that sometimes twanged, the body parts she favored in combat, the speed with which she moved. All of Arobynn's knowledge of her, wrapped around her in cloth and steel and darkness. She paused before the standing mirror against the far wall of the bedroom. A second skin. [. . .] there was not one inch left to the imagination. She let out a low whistle. Very well, then. She could be Celaena Sardothien again - for a little longer, until this game was finished. (Maas 75)

Thus, within the narrative world, knowledge is power, and Arobynn's impeccable knowledge of Aelin's power marks her, in his eyes, as belonging to him. Thus, in order for Arobynn to help her, Aelin has to play by his rules, and has to become once slip into the role of Celaena. Arobynn's information is even more powerful in this context, as knowing an opponent's weaknesses and strategies presents an advantage in combat. Therefore, in yet another power game between the two, Arobynn already postulates his superiority before the fight. Forcing Aelin to once again become Celaena Sardothien is even more striking, as it is now openly known that Aelin is a sovereign with unparalleled magical abilities. As she is back in a context where neither of these factors have any impact¹, Arobynn shows Aelin that she is yet again at the mercy of male power. Furthermore, he shows her, that she has to thank him for all of her abilities, as he claims that she would be helpless without him and now has "the ability to bring down men like Aedion Ashryver with a few blows" (355). Therefore, whenever Aelin is dressed in black, it signifies that she navigates a situation in which she needs to succumb to male dominance. Clothing thus becomes a means of transforming her rank. On the one hand, they are representative of Aelin's heritage, on the other hand they present her as subject to Arobynn's power. Similarly, clothes can either affirm gender or undermine gendered categories (Darwin 330) and signify meaning beyond their physicality (Vaid-Menon 10). Within the book, Aelin wearing a dress does not merely reaffirm her femininity, but through her clothes, she represents and accepts her role as Queen.

16 In that regard, the discourse around clothes exhibits the shifting and ambiguous qualities also attributed to non-binary and gender expansive identities, which present the possibility of moving beyond assigned categorizations (Darwin 330; Richards et al. 5; Stewart 67). While Aelin is ordered to wear black fighting gear by her master Arobynn, she can move beyond her allocated position as his subject. However, the negotiation of clothes still reflects a binary relation, as Aelin can either position herself as Arobynn's inferior, or his ultimate superior, she is either a weapon to be wielded, or claim her position as someone who can order entire armies,

¹ Magic has been banned and her country occupied by the King of Adarlan, the royal family killed and she as the heir declared lost.

she either wears assassin-black, or glittering and pompous dresses as Queen. Therefore, while Aelin moves between these different roles, there is no in-between, and no ambiguity. She disrupts the expectations set upon her in either of these performances, as she is neither a vulnerable subject, nor a queen unskilled in fighting. However, the negotiation of power her clothes reflect do not undermine the process of binary categorization. She is confined to her two roles as either assassin or Queen, and her development and growth does not allow for any possibility outside these two.

17 The impossibility of escaping this duality is reflected in the represented necessity for her to grow into her “queenhood” (Maas 15). Thus, Aelin might escape her position as inferior, but she can not escape the binary opposite as superior. Her growth is depicted as unavoidable path from immature girl, where fine dresses “overpowered the girl I [she] was” (242), towards her mature position as powerful and unparalleled Queen (341). Thus, while her role changes, there is no avoiding the opposite position. This impossibility is reflective of the gender binary, which restricts gendered existence to only men and women and excludes and represses non-binary and gender expansive identities (Darwin 319; Vaid-Menon 40; McCann & Monaghan 13). There is no ambiguity or graduation within Aelin’s roles, as she moves between extremes – she is either the most skilled assassin of the entire kingdom (Maas 343), or the most powerful Queen, due to her magical abilities (341). Therefore, while Aelin’s shift from subject to master undermines the fixation of categorization, the presentation of her roles as opposite extremes reaffirms the process of binary classification.

18 This is further represented by the implications of Aelin’s two roles, as she moves between death and destruction, and rebirth and restoration. In her role as an assassin, Aelin enjoys the thrill of fighting (196), is vengeful and vicious, and constantly “ready for bloodshed” (25). She “move[s] like a midnight storm” (196) and “[w]ith feline ease” (31). Overall, Aelin is unstoppable as the bringer of death when she performs as an assassin:

She was a whirling cloud of death, a queen of shadows, and these men were already carrion. Slashing and ducking and twirling, Aelin gave herself completely to that killing calm, until the blood was a mist around her and the gravel was slick with it. (Maas 149)

Her movements are described as a force of nature, being able to defend herself in any situation, not needing the help of others. She is seen as darkness and death, as a destroyer. In direct opposition to that, she is dependent on the help of others to restore her kingdom as Queen, and transcends her role as killing machine and instead becomes the bringer of light:

She was the heir of fire. She was fire, and light, and ash, and embers. She was Aelin Fireheart, and she bowed for no one and nothing, save the crown that was hers by blood and survival and triumph. (Maas 142)

Thus, as she reclaims her agency and heritage, Aelin's power gains another dimension: She can still destroy, and is deadly to those who threaten her and her people, but she also brings light, and hope to win this war, end oppression, and find peace for all peoples. Overall, her role as assassin is diametrically opposed to her position as Queen. Again, change and transformation are only possible as polar extremes, not allowing for any position in-between. The production of binary categories is reinforced, even if the potential of change is assumed.

Power Games and Struggles for Power

19 Aelin's transformation and disruption of gender expectation nevertheless still faces oppositions, as she constantly struggles to maintain her power. Similar to non-binary and gender expansive identities, whose existence is dependent on the recognition of others (Vaid-Menon 25; Darwin 331; Bergman 45; Luck 96), Aelin has to prove her power constantly. Her former position as Arobynn's subject has equipped her with the skills necessary to participate in negotiations of power, and her exploitation of gendered expectations allows her to be a powerful player herself (Maas 54). Her awareness of normative ideals works in her favour; however, it does not liberate her from the position as woman in a patriarchal society, or as Queen who has worked as an assassin. Thus, while Aelin is more powerful than her male adversaries, she still constantly has to prove and fight for her freedom. Even more so, she has to play by their rules, which she can undermine, disrupt, and subvert, but never fully abandon. Similarly, non-binary and gender expansive individuals continuously are required to explain, educate, and establish their own identity, and thus the existence of genders beyond a binary categorization (Bergman 43; Darwin 327). Furthermore, they are dependent on the willingness of others to understand as well as recognize their gender identity (Bergman 45; Darwin 331; Luck 96). Aelin is only powerful, if she herself is allowed a space in the narrative economy of the play; only with allies can she succeed in working against Adarlan. Additionally, her transformation from destroyer to bringer of light is dependent upon the male characters to not see her as monster (Maas 197).

20 Aelin is therefore an overtly powerful female character in a male dominated world, who has to submit to their power in order to eventually win the war and regulate her country and its structures by her own rules. Thus, Aelin's disruption of the idea of a defenceless and unskilled woman is not sufficient to truly exceed the limits society imposes on her. She might exploit gendered expectations regulated by the gender binary, but the binary itself still limits her freedom, agency, and power. The negotiation of power in this book thus shows that true power is exerted through the gender binary: Aelin cannot escape living in a patriarchal society, where she needs allies; she cannot win this war alone and she cannot be a rightful ruler without her people's approval. Aelin is thus only as powerful as her navigations of gendered relations allow

her to be. In a similar fashion, the gender binary regulates non-binary and gender expansive existence in order to maintain its own power (Darwin 319; McCann & Monaghan 13; Vaid-Menon 36). Therefore, non-normative gender expressions are always viewed through the lens of the gender binary (Dozono 435; McCann & Monaghan 7; Vaid-Menon 6), and are taken not seriously:

The assumption is that being a masculine man and a feminine woman is normal and that being us is an accessory. Like if you remove our clothing, our makeup, and our pronouns, underneath the surface we are just men and women playing dress up. (Vaid-Menon 17)

In that regard, even if gender disruptive behaviour is expressed, the struggle for recognition is continuous (Bergman 43; Darwin 327), as non-binary and gender expansive identities are viewed as exceptions or temporary disruptions. Power is needed in order to establish a space of existence. Aelin proves herself to be Queen by her skill in combat, as well as her magical abilities, and only becomes truly powerful through her allegiance with others. Non-binary and gender-expansive individuals are equally dependent upon community (Darwin 318; Vaid-Menon 25). Negotiations of power are thus still regulated by the gender binary, and a collective effort is needed to truly undermine normative ideals and expectations.

Moving Beyond the Gender Binary

21 The analysis has shown that the disruption of gendered expectations is not sufficient in undermining the gender binary itself. However, awareness towards the implications and limitations of the gender binary, of gendered language, presents the first step of subverting the power relations that are reliant on the binary. Aelin's negotiation of gendered expectations illuminates the power of gendered language (Luck 178; Vaid-Menon 30), and how the gender binary maps every action upon its normative ideals. In order to access a position of agency and power, gendered relations have to be navigated. Only then can new structures be established, and "normative scripts" (Darwin 330) be undermined, deconstructed, and transformed. Therefore, Aelin's power negotiations and her disruptions of gender expectations, her use of gendered language, is both normative, and liberating (Luck 100). Therefore, the analysis has shown how the subversion of gender expectations does not only disrupt but also reaffirm the gender binary.

22 In that regard, the way Aelin navigates power in a patriarchal society uncovers the interrelation between the gender binary and power, and further demonstrates that power is necessary in order to disrupt normative structures. Maas equips Aelin with the necessary tools to free herself from the limitations used to oppress her and shows her readers that gendered

expectations can be undermined. Nevertheless, Aelin's development is still reflective of binary relations, and while the stability of classifications is undermined, the presentation of her roles as polar extremes reinforces the process of binary categorization. As the analysis has therefore shown, building an awareness represents the first step in uncovering the implications of the gender binary, but is by no means sufficient in deconstructing the binary itself.

21 For future research, then, it would be fruitful to investigate a broader variety of texts as to uncover further implications of gendered language. Furthermore, the support of non-binary and gender expansive writers would facilitate a shift in power, outside the narrative world. Analysing their literature, then, could reflect such a shift. Overall, building an awareness towards the gender binary is essential for the construction of a more inclusive society, both inside and outside the text. Power first needs to be distributed in order to effectively disrupt the gender binary.

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