

## **“But you will be a girl heroes fear”: Mia Corvere’s Gender Portrayal and Queerness in Jay Kristoff’s *The Nevernight Chronicle***

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### **Abstract**

This article argues that Australian author Jay Kristoff's *Nevernight* trilogy contests, deconstructs, and subverts gendered restrictions and stereotypes often found in fantasy literature. Protagonist Mia Corvere overcomes both tropes of toxic masculinity and a single-minded focus on revenge by facing her fears, emotions, and embracing her queerness. As this article shows, the heroine's gender performance moves beyond binary constructions and challenges narrative conventions as well as reader assumptions.

## Introduction

Female protagonists of speculative fiction often fall prey to gender stereotypes and are not allowed much development apart from accumulating trauma. Authors habitually tend to let them exhibit traits of toxic masculinity portraying the often young woman or girl as a 'girlboss,' thus enforcing the patriarchal idea that stereotypically feminine traits are inferior while toxic masculinity is the only way to success. Representations embracing the idea that characters can have many attributes rather than being stereotypically limited is mirrored by studies that evaluate gender stereotypes: "Women should be communal and avoid being dominant. Men should be agentic, independent, masculine in appearance, and interested in science and technology, but avoid being weak, emotional, shy, and feminine in appearance" (Koenig 1). Fiction mirrors these stereotypical ideas and tries to subvert them—often unsuccessfully. Especially queer representation, for example of bisexual women, tends to then draw on various further stereotypes, and lack nuance.

The following article analyses Mia Corvere, the bisexual (anti)heroine of Australian author Jay Kristoff's *Nevernight* trilogy. Through this character, Kristoff deconstructs binary and stereotypical reader expectations, foregrounding—in line with Judith Butler—that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time [...] through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (*Gender Trouble* 140). In addition, Kristoff's character refuses the reproduction of toxic masculinity, e.g., by being more than just a strong 'female' character mirroring stereotypically 'male' behaviour. It will be traced how Mia develops throughout the novels, how she avoids being overcome by her anger, trauma, and need for revenge, and how she negotiates her queer identity in the later novels. It will be argued that Mia as the main character of the series challenges stereotypical notions of gender and heteronormative expectations of the fantasy genre. Problematic stereotypes such as assumed bisexual promiscuity or tropes like 'killing the gays' are also addressed.

According to Judith Butler

there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification (*Gender Trouble* 33).

This paper traces how Mia performs gender while she moves from being a dark, dangerous, and vengeful assassin to *becoming* a kind, sympathetic, queer woman. On this journey, she is presented as willing to sacrifice herself for others, experiencing (queer) love, and struggling in a patriarchal story world. Kristoff's protagonist Mia showcases how to

break free from norms and restrictions by highlighting agency, bodily autonomy, sex, and gender performance.

### **Gender, Stereotypes, and Queer Deconstruction**

Judith Butler's emphasis on gender "requir(ing) a performance that is repeated" (*Gender Trouble* 140) enabled important conceptual revisions: that sex does not determine gender, that there are no essential feminine or masculine attributes, that heteronormativity is not natural, and that the straitjacket of socially imposed restrictive binary oppositions has to be replaced by an acknowledgment of a wide spectrum of possibilities. In this context, queerness, true to its original understanding as 'out of the norm', can be understood as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality are not made (or cannot be made)" (Sedgwick as qtd. in Flanagan 33). Queerness allows for a plethora of different identities, which can be showcased in literary texts actively promoting the potential diversity of lived experiences.

However, literature often fails to free itself from gender stereotypes, as can be seen, for example, in reproductions of heteronormativity in children's books (Taylor 307), foregrounding "normative roles for women and men, and require(ing) [...] of them different responsibilities and kinds of work" (300), thereby enforcing patriarchal divisions between genders. Subsequently, traits that are stereotypically viewed as feminine, including submissiveness, dependency, weakness, passivity, sensitivity expressed in adjectives such as "emotional", "weak" and "timid" (Macionis as qtd. in Taylor 304), contribute to the reduction of women to sex objects (especially in older speculative fiction). Stereotypically masculine traits entailing a spectrum of notions from (sexual) dominance, intelligence, rationality, independence, assertiveness, strength, bravery, activity, aggression, and competition, take their attraction from a connection to "achievement" (Macionis as qtd. in Taylor 304). Gender identity and its expression thus is intricately related to assumptions about one's personhood and character: children "may have internalized certain behaviors and attitudes" (Taylor 306) which are hard to challenge and unlearn. Yet, the binary division between supposed masculinity and femininity is nothing but a repetitive performance:

[T]here is no preexisting identity by which an act of attribute might be measured; [...] That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities of proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality (*Gender Trouble* Butler 141).

Because of imbalanced depictions of gender(s), female desire is often left unacknowledged in literature, particularly within the fantasy genre; sex is mystified or phallus-centric; female pleasure is rendered secondary.

In fantasy literature, specific roles and tropes are often connected to gender: female characters are frequently constructed as damsels in distress in need of rescuing; male characters are portrayed as brave, strong, and saving victimised, passive princesses from fiery dragons. This toxic binary construction of roles and behaviour conceptualises emotional male characters as emasculated and unattractive, while toxic masculinity is celebrated. The prevalence of the latter has been read as a response to a supposed “crisis of masculinity” (Kimmel 46) in the wake of historical movements towards female emancipation and queer rights, and a concomitant deconstruction of binaries: Masculinity as “a fragile flower” (Faludi 76) can only find reassurance through an all the more fervent insistence on exaggerated forms of hyper-masculinity as “constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence” (Kupers as qtd. in Zuckerberg 13). Speculative fiction can reaffirm but also contrast, deconstruct and subvert these binary constructions.

Interestingly enough, if speculative fiction authors want to emancipate their female characters, they often tend to assign them stereotypical masculine traits: women are no longer “the opposite and inferior to the masculine standard” (Hekman 103), but rather embody it. They are strong, violent, phallic gun-wielding badasses who cannot talk about their feelings. Famous examples include Ellen Ripley in the *Alien* movies, who is mostly celebrated for her tough behaviour while wielding guns, or Elizabeth Swan in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, who moves from damsel in distress to tomboyish pirate queen. N.K. Jemisin describes this as the ‘Strong Female Character Stereotype’ (SFC): “Thus people begin to believe that the SFC is the only way for a woman to be strong — and they simply stop noticing the many, many other examples of women’s strength around them” (Jemisin n.p.). In addition, this stereotype can be used to shame women with postfeminist<sup>1</sup> ideas:

And we put the blame for everything women endure because of sexism [...] on women, because strong women ought to be able to fix all these problems single-handedly. This absolves men of any responsibility for the system that benefits

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<sup>1</sup> Negra and Tasker assess that neoliberal postfeminism is closely connected to its rhetoric, for example “buzzwords and slogans to express visions of energetic personal empowerment (the borrowed African American idiom “You go, girl!” the phrase “girl power,” etc.” (3). “Girlboss” can be conceptualised in exactly that way. Feminism is “constituted as an unwelcome, implicitly censorious presence, it is precisely feminist concerns that are silenced within postfeminist culture” (Negra and Tasker 3).

them. And thus the Strong Female Character ends up supporting, not subverting, sexism (Jemisin n.p.).

Nuance is often lacking, and female characters turn into 'girl bosses' (to use the infantilising, pop-culture term used in an ironical way by TikTok users these days) through this embrace of what is essentially toxic masculinity. When Butler understands the category of 'women' as fiction because "this subject is created and maintained by the actions that are dictated by the concept" (Hekman 103), deconstructing binary notions of gender is not at all what these 'badass,' strong, female characters in speculative fiction do. Thus, the "process of 'undoing' the textual construction of masculinity and femininity as inherently oppositional attributes requires more than simply altering the schemata of behavioural attributes typically associated with each category of gender" (Flanagan 26). More needs to be done than just reversing "character archetypes or story outcomes" as this still maintains "the ideological construction of femininity and masculinity as inherently oppositional, binary concepts" (Flanagan 26-27). Agency can be derived from variation according to Butler, as "signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition*" (145, original emphasis).<sup>2</sup>

### **Mia Corvere – The Vengeful Assassin**

The story of Mia Corvere, a 16-year-old young woman seeking revenge<sup>3</sup>, can be read as a powerful example of the subversion of gender roles in revenge tragedies. Mia's narrative operates the classical motif of a desire to avenge her family's unjust demise. Forms of revenge in Western literature and culture are clearly gendered, as evident in the different methods of murder, distinguishing between female poisoners and male executors of brute force. In cultural production, inevitably "violence is intertwined with sexual and gendered themes" (Hall 282). Typically, "[r]evenge narratives represent manliness as a highly prized commodity that individuals acquire through retaliatory acts of violence [...] [that] repeat[] and reinforc[e] such oppressive gender norms" (Dawson 3). In the tradition of revenge narrative, for women as "the guardians of a

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, many famous speculative fiction novels (*Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *The Wheel of Time*) still operate in a binary manner excluding trans or non-binary identities. The same is true for the *Nevernight* trilogy, which features no trans- or non-binary characters.

<sup>3</sup> In general, Mia's thirst for revenge reminds the reader heavily of Arya Stark from George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* book series. Comparing the two characters and exploring in how far Martin might have inspired Kristoff seems a productive topic for future articles as Martin, too, subverts gender assumptions and features revenge-driven character arcs.

conservative ideal of manliness aligned with violent reprisal" (ibid.) revenge cannot be empowering. In the tradition of revenge narrative, for women as "the guardians of a conservative ideal of manliness aligned with violent reprisal" (ibid.) revenge cannot be empowering. In Renaissance revenge tragedies such as Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* or Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, revenge is "a man's right and duty" (Dawson 6). By contrast female avengers tend to be "depicted as monstrous, hybrid creatures who blur the distinction between masculine and feminine" (Dawson 8). In Kristoff's novel Mia not only takes on the task of revenge herself, but is driven by it, threatened to even be consumed by it. Her weapons are both 'traditional' physical weapons, but also her magic and her words. She merges the various roles that are usually connected to masculine revenge, yet is not perceived as 'monstrous.' Moreover, her queerness further disrupts the heteronormative binaries that are at work at the heart of the traditional revenge tragedy.

### *Nevernight*

The very beginning of *Nevernight* already introduces the key theme of revenge and intertwining it with the motif of sexual intercourse, a connection that is revisited again and again in the novel. The paragraphs in chapter one of the book alternate between italics and normal print, italics describing Mia's first time with a male prostitute and regular print describing her first kill. The passages echo each other, foregrounding the connection between sex and violence on a verbal level: while "[t]he boy was beautiful" (*Nevernight* 5) is contrasted with "[t]he man was repugnant," (ibid.) the phrase "'Fuck me [...]' she breathed" (*Nevernight* 7) is used in the erotic context as well as evoked by the scared man she is about to murder, "'Fuck me [...]' he breathed" (*Nevernight* 8). While Mia is "trying not to cry" (*Nevernight* 9) during her hurtful rather than pleasurable intercourse with the prostitute, her victim of revenge desperately implores her to stop when she yields her power on top of him (*Nevernight* 10). From the very first pages, through this juxtaposition of sex and violence, Mia is not the female protagonist (or even heroine) readers expect her to be: Mia does not attribute anything special to her first time having sex, thereby deconstructing the patriarchal narrative that connects women's self-esteem with the preservation of sexual innocence for 'the one' worthy of this 'most valuable gift'. This episode also unobtrusively normalises sex work, when it is later revealed that Mia's sex partner is a prostitute. Overall, Mia is not presented as an 'innocent' young girl,<sup>4</sup> while in addition the foreshadowing at the end of the first

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<sup>4</sup> The term "girl" is used throughout the text to refer to Mia even though she is a (young) woman. While the infantilisation of women has a long-standing history within patriarchal narratives, for example Beauvoir "conceptualised women as the 'eternal child'" (Laing

chapter destabilises the idea that the main protagonist must be a hero: “You’ll be a rumour [...] The last thing you will ever be in this world girl, is someone’s hero” (*Nevernight* 13). Mia will be “a girl heroes fear” (*ibid.*), as she can handle weapons and has just killed a man. Yet she is not unambiguously evil as evident in the various flashbacks which explain the protagonist’s thirst for revenge: She watched her father being branded as a traitor and killed before her eyes. Her mother telling her to “*Never flinch*” and “*Never fear*” (*Nevernight* 17)—despite her childhood trauma—has become her mantra.

The next thing the reader learns is that Mia is no beauty. Protagonists in fantasy are often described as exceptionally beautiful, in line with fairy tale conventions where beauty equals morality. Although in stories within the story world of *Nevernight*, Mia’s beauty is “described [...] otherworldly; all milk-white skin and slender curves and bow-shaped lips” (*Nevernight* 18), this is exposed as poetic convention, when the reader learns that “[m]ilk-white’ is just pretty talk for ‘pasty” and ‘[s]lender’ is a poet’s way of saying ‘starved” (*Nevernight* 18).<sup>5</sup> The narrative offers a reality check with regards to hyperbolic descriptions of bodies, especially female bodies: Mia is “pale and her cheeks hollow”, “short”, “[s]tick-thin”, has “[b]arely enough arse for her britches to cling to” and a nose that shows signs of having been broken (*Nevernight* 18). She defies conventional ideas of beauty or attractiveness. This explicitly contrasts with traditional descriptions of women in poetry or narrative, Mia is not the epitome of unrealistic beauty standards, but is described as a rather scrawny girl whose appearance reflects her rough past.

Fearlessness is another factor that is often associated with traditionally male heroes. Mia has a peculiar shadow, a cat-like creature named Mister Kindly, who literally makes her fearless as he lives off her fear. Therefore, Mia is independent and unflinching, but only as long as magic protects her from her trauma and her emotions. When Mister Kindly leaves during *Nevernight*, Mia is plagued by nightmares (connecting her to the past) and has to live through all of her fears

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1), calling Mia a girl is both a narrative choice as well as a subversion. Mia might be called a child within the patriarchal system of Kristoff’s storyworld, but she is a woman who is being underestimated. Focussing on this conceptualisation of the so-called woman-child, which is a “highly normative version of womanhood, tending to be young, cis-gendered, white, slender, heteronormative and able-bodied” (Laing 4) and having a character who disrupts this pattern is a challenge to patriarchal ideas, especially the aforementioned discourse on innocence which “feeds into images of the woman-child” (Laing 4). Mia is no girl and fights both the term as well as the ideas and stereotypes that go with it.

<sup>5</sup> This can be read as implicit reference to Shakespeare’s meta sonnet 130: “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”.

(*Nevernight* 314). While she might seem almost emotionless, losing Mister Kindly leads to Mia becoming a less stereotypical and more nuanced, vulnerable, and relatable character. Mia is not helpless without her shadow daemon, she is a Darkin who can weave darkness and move through it: “Thread by thread, she drew the darkness to her with clever fingers, like a seamstress weaving a cloak [...], a cloak of shadows” (*Nevernight* 45). Throughout her development in the two sequels, Mia needs to learn to live with her fear, and embrace that emotions are not making her inferior.

Mia does not care about what is presumed to be ‘lady-like behaviour’; she is not silent, meek or shy. She swears (“A right cunt<sup>6</sup> and no mistake” (*Nevernight* 62)) and always speaks her mind. While in traditional revenge texts, “curses are primarily the weapon of the weak against the strong,” (Dawson 12), Mia curses continuously in addition to her bodily prowess in fighting. Mia is aggressive and reacts badly to insults. Her anger issues erupt in violence, something that she reflects upon and regrets (*Nevernight* 370-372), but cannot overcome easily. Instead of being randomly submissive, dependent, weak, passive, nurturing, and timid (all characteristics that are deemed stereotypically female), Mia is dominant, independent, strong, active, brave, and not very good at dealing with emotions or accepting help at first.<sup>7</sup>

As established earlier, Mia is quite fearless when it comes to exploring her sexuality. At the Red Church where she trains to become a professional assassin, Mia learns to weaponise her body (quite stereotypically in the tradition of the femme fatale). She is taught how to topple empires not by blades but by identifying and exploiting weaknesses of the patriarchal system: “[T]his is a world of senators and consuls [...]—of republics and cults and institutions built and maintained almost entirely by men. And in it, love is a weapon. Sex is a weapon. Your eyes? Your body? Your smile? [...] Weapons” (*Nevernight* 171). Her outward appearance is subsequently changed to be more alluring: a weaver uses

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<sup>6</sup> This specific insult is very misogynistic, yet in Kristoff's books, Mia explains that this is actually a compliment: “You're implying a sense of malice there. An intent. Malevolent and self-aware. [...] Cunts have brains, Don Tric. Cunts have teeth. Someone calls you a cunt, you take it as a compliment. As a sign that folk believe you're not to be lightly fucked with” (*Nevernight* 63).

<sup>7</sup> Mia is merciful and has strong sense of ethics: when she is asked to kill a boy as an initiation test, she refuses. Even though Mia is the “most feared killer in Itreya, murderess of legions, Lady of Blades, destroyer of the Republic,” (*Nevernight* 24) she has “[m]ercy, even for rapists and brutes” (ibid.), playing with the expectations of readers who want their protagonist to be a hero(ine) who has having mercy only with ‘deserving’ people. Moral ambiguity and characters meandering between good and bad are typical for Kristoff's trilogy.

magic and gives her fuller breasts, straightens her nose, fills out her lips, and fixes her complexion (*Nevernight* 175). Obviously, this goes against the initial description of Mia not being overly beautiful, falling into the make-over trope. Nevertheless, Mia still does not care much about how she looks, smells, or dresses. This foregrounds the performance of gender conventions and is contrasted with Mia's inner turmoil.

Despite her rather unsatisfying first sexual experiences, Mia gradually learns more about herself and desire. Kristoff is quite graphic in the descriptions of intercourse. Whenever Mia initiates sex with her fellow assassin Tric, she regularly is the one in power, and almost predatory in her pursuit: "He groaned as she kissed him, deep and long and warm, hands wrapped in her hair as she pushed him hard, back against the wall, muscle slapping stone," (*Nevernight* 270) connecting sex with power and violence. She no longer is a "shivering virgin on bloodstained sheets" and no "frightened maid" (*Nevernight* 271). As Mia is the focaliser, Tric becomes her sex object, and all descriptions focus on female pleasure (*Nevernight* 313), subverting the patriarchal mechanics of traditional narrative patterns. While she performs hegemonic masculinity in her sexual behaviour with Tric, this changes later on when it comes to her queer experiences, something that is only hinted at in the first book: Ashlinn kisses her goodbye "a moment too long" or "[p]erhaps not long enough" (*Nevernight* 396). Mia is on the fence about this "[w]arm and soft and honeysweet" (*Nevernight* 396) kiss; she has a "million unsaid words shining in her eyes" (*ibid.*) confronted with a "million unsaid words shining in her [Ash's] eyes" (*ibid.*). This foreshadows Mia's relationship with Ashlinn in *Godsgrave* and *Darkdawn* when her behaviour becomes less coded by binary oppositions.

### *Godsgrave*

Binary opposites are also contested with regard to bodily strength and how certain genders are perceived. In the second book of the trilogy, Mia lets herself be captured in order to become a member of the gladiatii, as the fights in the arena give her access and proximity to those who wronged her (*Godsgrave* 21). Mia is confronted with sexist or misogynistic attitudes when undercover as a slave gladiator, as this supposedly "is no place for women" (*Godsgrave* 51). When a fellow gladiator holds back when fighting her, "[b]ecause [...] you're a girl,"

(*Godsgrave* 139), Mia is infuriated and defeats him asking him to see beyond her body and (assumed) sex (not gender, interestingly)<sup>8</sup>:

'Take hold of your fucking jewels,' she said. 'Maybe your mother raised you to treat us all as delicate flowers, maybe you're just thinking with your cock. But there *are* no girls on the sand [...] Only *enemies*. You spend a moment worrying about what's between your opponent's legs, you'll find your head parted from your body. And what good will your fool cock do then?' (*Godsgrave* 139).

Mia is no delicate flower, and she despises gender-specific rules. However, she is proud to be a great fighter in a patriarchal setting despite or maybe even because of her gender. This pride and the internalised idea that she is only worthy when strong are often in her way, particularly when it comes to trusting others, admitting to her trauma or dealing with her emotions. The more Mia changes, the more she overcomes toxic masculinity and reaches a more nuanced way of living.

While Mia's queerness is already hinted at in the first book, she starts questioning her sexuality in *Godsgrave*. This is a major step moving away from the conventional, heterosexual love story in the first part and towards a more nuanced understanding of sexuality as a spectrum that is not based on binary distinctions. Falling in love and coming to terms with one's queerness covers a long period of time in the narrative. Mia starts to see Ashlinn in a different light after they worked together for a long time, falling in love with her character, not only her body. The narration captures her growing desire: "Mia stared. Ashlinn's eyes. Ashlinn's hands. Ashlinn's lips. The girl simply stared back, letting the silence ask all her questions for her. Mia ignored them all" (*Godsgrave* 219). In her conceptualisation of the male (and female) gaze in Hollywood cinema, Mulvey stressed how "female viewing involve(s) an oscillation between a masculine position (identification with the 'active' male character or male spectator) and a feminine position (masochistic identification with the female character as fetishized object of the gaze)" (Laing 64). Mia's female gaze and desire translates differently narration-wise, it is gradually freeing itself from the patriarchal frame: Ash's body is described, but not with a focus on the sexualised body parts that are primarily connected to the male gaze, like breasts, hips, and crotch. Rather, Kristoff uses alliterations to emphasise Mia's queer desire: "Ash's breath coming quicker as she came fully awake, aware, awonder, the skin of her bare arms prickling. And as she parted her lips to speak, perhaps to protest, Mia leaned in and silenced her with a kiss" (*Godsgrave* 279). Parallel to Mia seducing

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<sup>8</sup> While this could be explained by the pseudo-historical setting of the novels, arguably the *Nevernight Chronicles* still move within the binaries of gender and sex, despite the inclusion of queer desire.

Tric, she now seduces Ash, giving and receiving pleasure “like nothing she’d ever known” (*Godsgrave* 280).

As indicated in the very first scene of the first book, sex has been related to power for Mia. When having sex with her female partner, Mia has “never felt so much power; her every movement, every flick of her tongue or touch of her lips eliciting a groan, a whispering plea, a tremor running the length of Ashlinn’s entire body” (ibid. 281). However, while it seems that Mia is the seductress and not the seduced, she is not limited to the active, ‘male’ role in their relationship: Ashlinn too makes Mia beg (for the first time in her life), reversing their roles (ibid. 283), working towards a deconstruction of binary roles through (queer) sex. The novel(s) acknowledge female desire and explicitly addresses queer sex prioritising female orgasm. Ash too can be read as a character that stands for a different form of femininity and strength. She is not as toxic as Mia (despite being an assassin herself) helping Mia to challenge her toxic masculinity and blind focus on revenge. Mia and Ash’s love story, which is not limited to stereotypes, offers a nuanced representation of queer desire and sex. While Mia feels that she has been tasked with revenge, loving Ashlinn has been Mia’s choice (ibid. 286) and “[n]othing would ever be the same again” (ibid. 287). Ashlinn believes in Mia helping her to come to terms with herself: “You’re brave. And you’re bright. And you’re beautiful” (*Godsgrave* 243). Mia’s falling in love with Ashlinn enables her to face her trauma.

### *Darkdawn*

In the last book of the trilogy, *Darkdawn*,<sup>9</sup> Mia has to deal with her younger brother who was raised as the son of her enemy under a different name. As Mia is not the caring or patient type, and has no experience with children, she initially is unable to deal with him, cannot control her anger, slapping him when he insults her mother, and regretting it instantaneously: “Mia was horrified at herself. Exhausted and frightened and aching all the way to her bones” (ibid. 42). Slowly, their sibling relationship improves, and Mia actually experiences something akin to familial love, something that she mostly had to live without. She actively has to learn how to care for her brother. The novel does not exhibit instantaneous motherly devotion on the part of Mia, but allows her to

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<sup>9</sup> The most interesting aspect, narration-wise, is that a meta-level is included: the two first books show up as actual books and as part of the storyline, as Mia’s former mentor and father-figure Mercurio finds them. This is not only a humorous take on some choices from earlier books like “‘*Nevernight*,’ he muttered. ‘Stupid name for a book’” (*Darkdawn* 33) to *Godsgrave*, the sequel, which is deemed better by characters of the storyworld as there is “[l]ess fucking about at the start” (ibid. 34).

develop emotions and challenge her traumatic past and loss of her parents. Being the caretaker in a non-toxic manner is difficult for Mia, but she is rewarded with a brother who loves her back.

The same development can be found with regards to her anger issues and relationships: when Mia finds out that the man who raised her is not her father and that the “rage that had sustained her through all the years and all the miles and all the sleepless nevernights” (ibid. 61) was based on misinformation, she gives in to her anger and wants to continue running away from her feelings, her friends, and family. Mia knows that anger kept her from thinking, that anger allowed her to “simply *act*” (ibid. 61) and that this is not healthy, but she needs Ashlinn to calm her down. While it may be a cliché that love heals everything, the novel suggests that a safe environment may foster the healing process and may function as a way out of toxic behaviour. Ash creates an environment in which Mia is allowed to be afraid, to feel her feeling because she does not need to perform in a toxic patriarchal world: “Tears welled in Mia’s eyes [...]. The walls loomed about her, ready to come crashing down. Her hands fluttered at her sides as if she were desperate for an embrace, but too torn to beg for one” (ibid. 62). Throughout the book, Ashlinn stays by her side, willing to “rip all three suns out of heaven to keep her safe” (ibid. 143). Even though they fight, they always make up, and Mia can draw strength from her relationship with Ashlinn: “She closed her eyes and let Ashlinn’s hands shush everything away for a moment” (ibid. 156). While both women are “driven by vengeance,” (ibid. 160) Ashlinn is more vulnerable around Mia. There “were parts of herself Ash kept just for Mia—like secrets in the dark, whispered without speaking” (ibid. 160). It also allows Mia to think about a future filled with queer love and beyond revenge (ibid. 164), which furthers her character development.

Ashlinn offers Mia an alternative to hate, death, violence, revenge as well as toxic masculine behaviour: “I know you might not see a life like that for yourself, but you can have it if you want it,” (ibid. 164). Mia could have a life with love, a life where she is not alone. “Truth was, this tiny respite, these friends and familia<sup>10</sup> around her—it was the closest she’d had for normalcy for eight years. She wondered what her life might have been. What she might have had before it was taken away from her” (ibid. 197). She favours Ashlinn (ibid. 297) over her resurrected ex-boyfriend Tric, even though she is tempted. By choosing Ashlinn and refusing to

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<sup>10</sup> Kristoff intentionally uses mafia-vocabulary here to describe the intense relationship between Mia and her followers and friends, but also to describe the unavoidable responsibility that Mia has taken on because of her vow to avenge her family.

have sex with Tric, the reader is baited with the conventional trope of bisexual promiscuity while the expected love triangle is averted.

Another problematic trope regarding queer relationships follows shortly after, when Ash is poisoned and dies in Mia's arms. Queer representation on page, stage, or screen often ends with death, the so-called 'killing the gays' trope. Mia seems left "[f]orever and ever" (ibid. 409) alone, unable to save Ashlinn even though she tried. "Mia's chest was heaving, grief shaking her body" (ibid. 408), but "for all her power, all her gifts, this was a foe she couldn't best" (ibid. 408). Love had been intertwined with death and violence throughout the book, the elegiac tone foreshadowing this final loss threatening to unhinge Mia entirely. Tric sacrifices himself and Ash is resurrected (ibid. 495). This takes up but at the same time reverses the problematic 'queer death' trope, which then returns with Mia's later death. At the finale of the last book, Mia heroically sacrifices herself to prevent disaster. Right before her sacrifice, Mia mourns what could have been, she misses her partner, friends, and family and bitterly repeats the words that "shaped her, ruled her, ruined her" (ibid. 429), but which had fuelled her throughout the three books: "*Never flinch. Never fear. Never forget*" (429). At last, Mia realises how toxic and problematic her thirst for revenge was and how much she lost along the way. Revenge per se is shown to be useless and all-consuming. Mia also realises that "[f]ear was never my fate" (ibid. 461) and that her preoccupation with revenge, fear, and grief stood in the way of herself being happy and surrounded by friends, family and lover.

While the reader assumes that Mia is gone, in yet another twist at the very end of the third novel she returns to Ashlinn, changed: "She'd thought Mia's eyes were just empty darkness, but this close, this dangerously, wonderfully close, she could see they were filled with tiny sparks of light, like stars strewn across the curtains of night above" (ibid. 523). Mia has completed her revenge, has heroically sacrificed herself to save others, and now she is free to live her life. Against all odds and the heavy foreshadowing before, Ashlinn and Mia receive their happy ending "[f]orever and ever" (ibid. 524), fully negating the 'killing the gays' stereotype.

## Conclusion

While parts of Mia's character are initially coded as toxically masculine, especially her desire for revenge that only brings her grief, she struggles with this task and with embracing love and help. In the end she is utterly disillusioned about the necessity and effect of revenge. In the end Mia completes her revenge, but mostly to save others; it is no longer her utmost desire or an end in itself. She is not punished by the narrative, but finds her happy ending with Ashlinn. The representation of Mia's agency,

convictions, and anger issues challenges notions of ideal femininity as silent, chaste, and obedient which are connected to the tradition of revenge narrative: “rather than penalizing ‘bad girls’ [...] authors reward ‘bad girls’ and [...] allow them to prevail at the end” (Chatraporn 51). However, while Mia might at first appear as a ‘strong female badass character’, she moves beyond this simplified gender role reversal and subverts assumptions of stereotypically female or stereotypically male attributes. Moreover, stereotypical tropes in connection to bisexuality are taken up, but eventually refuted in favor of a nuanced, complex queer relationship based on choice.

Breaking free from socially shaped norms and restricting gender assumptions, literature can contribute to an understanding of gender as performance and its impact on sexual desire. Jay Kristoff's trilogy *Nevernight Chronicles* foregrounds the subversion and deconstruction of binary gender assumptions through a variety of interconnected themes: Mia as ‘masculine’ avenger subverts assumptions of traditional revenge narratives about the stereotypical relation between gender and sexual desire, male bodily strength and violence and female beauty. More importantly, however, Mia's queer relationship with Ash allows her to also overcome the stereotype of toxic masculinity, to confront her traumatic past, experience love, and have healthy relationships for the first time in her adult life. Through her experiences of (especially queer) love, but also through her (found) family, Mia learns to take care of herself and her relationships in a nuanced manner. The explicit focus on female sexuality and desire prioritises female desire, female orgasm and a female gaze through which the reader witnesses the protagonist becoming a woman, finding a version of womanhood free from stereotypical attributes and embracing queerness as a vital part of her character development.

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