

“LOCK UP YOUR SONS”: QUEERING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE AND  
SOCIAL DISCOURSE

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
August 2012

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DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

DATE: August 17, 2012

AUTHOR: Rebekah Wheadon

TITLE: “Lock Up Your Sons”: Queering Young Adult Literature and Social Discourse

DEPARTMENT OR SCHOOL: Department of English

DEGREE: MA CONVOCATION: October YEAR: 2012

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For all the other kids who were always digging through used book stores and searching every library shelf for novels with queer characters. Hopefully, that same activity will be easier (thank you, internet), and the books you find will be less horrible. I hope that someday we won't have to search for queer teens on the page in order to try and place ourselves in the world. Until then, however, remember: car crashes may figure prominently in YA with LGBTQ teens, but there isn't any link between being queer and being a bad driver. Correlation—especially the literary kind!—does not equal causation.

Just in case, though, buckle up. And read fearlessly (just not while driving).

## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	vii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED.....	viii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ix
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER II: “MORE THAN COMING OUT STORIES”: CONTEMPORARY YA, QUEER YOUTH, AND LITERARY DIVERSIFICATION.....	12
i. Silence, Confession, and Queer Discursive Analysis.....	13
ii. “Doomed Unfortunates”: A History of LGBTQ Representation in YA.....	22
iii. Conclusion.....	36
CHAPTER III: “A MILLION LITTLE PAPERCUTS EVERY DAY”: QUEER PAIN, SOCIAL SCRIPTS, AND <i>THE MORTAL INSTRUMENTS</i> .....	38
i. Invisible Things: Queer Pain and Isolation.....	39
ii. “I guess you’re coming as my date”: Heteronormativity and Queer Poisoning....	47
iii. Conclusion.....	51
CHAPTER IV: LAVENDER SHIRTS AND EARRINGS: SARAH REES BRENNAN’S <i>DEMONS</i> TRILOGY, PARODY, AND A HUGE MAGICAL BADASS.....	54
i. “He’s harmless”: Femininity, Parody, and Lavender.....	55
ii. A Third Tier Mark: Contagion and Heteronormativity.....	65
iii. Conclusion.....	69
CHAPTER V: “MOM, YOU KNOW THAT FORBIDDEN LOVE THAT SPOCK HAS FOR KIRK? WELL, ME TOO”: HOLLY BLACK’S <i>MODERN FAERIE TALES</i> AND QUEER RECUPERATION.....	71
i. Shonen Ai and a Mullet: Queer Desire and Antagonism.....	72
ii. “Let everything you touch wither”: Glamour, Curses, and Queer Recuperation.....	80

iii. Conclusion.....	83
CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION.....	85
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	89

## **Abstract**

Young adult literature (YA) has been stereotypical in many of its portrayals of LGBTQ teens from the 1960s to the early 2000s, but three contemporary YA series--Cassandra Clare's *The Mortal Instruments*, Sarah Rees Brennan's *Demons* trilogy, and Holly Black's *Modern Faerie Tales*--indicate a change toward more nuanced characterizations. Using four categories--scriptedness, context, importance, and sexuality--to determine whether these representations of LGBTQ youth challenge or reiterate older tropes, my analysis indicates that YA has moved toward more complex representations of queerness, yet some normative discursive structures are still at work, such as poisonings or curses, supernatural parallels to coming out, and heteronormative humour. Although representations of queerness have diversified, then, the implicit ideologies in each author's portrayal of queerness demands closer attention.

## List of Abbreviations Used

APA	American Psychological Association
<i>Bodies</i>	<i>Bodies That Matter</i> (Judith Butler)
CoA	<i>City of Ashes</i> (Cassandra Clare)
CoB	<i>City of Bones</i> (Cassandra Clare)
CoFA	<i>City of Fallen Angels</i> (Cassandra Clare)
CoG	<i>City of Glass</i> (Cassandra Clare)
CoLS	<i>City of Lost Souls</i> (Cassandra Clare)
<i>Covenant</i>	<i>The Demon's Covenant</i> (Sarah Rees Brennan)
<i>Lexicon</i>	<i>The Demon's Lexicon</i> (Sarah Rees Brennan)
LGBTQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, and queer
<i>Surrender</i>	<i>The Demon's Surrender</i> (Sarah Rees Brennan)
YA	Young adult literature



## Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the excellent guidance of Dr. Anthony Enns throughout this process. When I first approached Dr. Enns with breathless enthusiasm for what I saw as a project that would combine my passion for YA with my academic pursuits, he responded with a similar excitement. Dr. Enns has always had faith in my ability to reign this project in and produce worthwhile work, and that innate trust in my ability to complete this thesis has helped me have faith in myself. Throughout, Dr. Enns has been encouraging, insightful, and interested. I cannot imagine having a better supervisor and feel immensely privileged to have worked with him.

My sincerest thanks to my second reader, Dr. Jason Haslam, for his invaluable insight on the topic of queer theory and his incredibly kind comments and critiques. I am also grateful for Dr. Kathy Cawsey's input on young adult literature, teenage sexuality, and parsing out some statistics that were giving me a bit of trouble.

In addition, I would like to thank the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their generous funding through the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship program. Without the assistance from SSHRC, this year would not have been possible.

I was fortunate enough to be part of an exceptional group of graduate students, each and every one of whom has helped me on this year's journey. While I cannot say that every step of the process has been fun (with the exception of every Friday afternoon—those were a blast!), working alongside this wonderful group of men and women has kept me motivated, inspired, and excited. If only every graduate student was

so lucky to have such an excellent support network, I imagine a lot more of us would make it through our degrees with our hearts intact. Thanks, friends.

My parents have been wonderfully supportive throughout this process: from check-ins to encouraging words and miniature vacations in the Valley, they've helped me pull through the hard times with an unwavering confidence in my ability to finish this thesis. I count myself fortunate to have such intelligent and engaged parents. And, yes, Mum, you'll definitely be able to understand what follows!

Finally, my most heartfelt thanks to my partner, Kerstin Wilson, who always had faith that I could not only complete this work, but that I was also doing something important. This is for you, lady.

## Chapter I: Introduction

Young adult literature, also known as YA,<sup>1</sup> is a specific genre of literature that originated in the 1960s (Jenkins, “Queer” 298). Although children’s literature has been a robust subset of literature since medieval times,<sup>2</sup> YA is crafted specifically for adolescents and teenagers and thus distinguishes itself from children’s literature by addressing specifically “teenage” issues. Christine Jenkins argues that YA is “centered on the developmental and life phase issues associated with adolescence and is created for and marketed to a teenage readership” (“Queer” 298). Furthermore, YA is likely to deal openly with issues such as race, sexuality, gender, substance use and abuse, sexual abuse, and identity politics: it is, to put it bluntly, a different beast than most children’s literature. YA often grapples with troubling and culturally “hot” issues, such as AIDS or eating disorders, depending on the time of publication. Most YA, Jenkins argues, centres on a “problem” or issue, although she admits that this is most often the case in young adult realist novels (“Queer” 299).<sup>3</sup> While this means that YA sometimes lacks staying

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout, I choose to use YA as shorthand for young adult fiction. I do not append “fiction” to “YA” (“YA fiction”) because, in its common use, the term is understood to be included in the acronym.

<sup>2</sup> The history of children’s literature, while fascinating, does not pertain directly to my project except in the broadest sense. Still, works such as Seth Lerer’s *Children’s Literature: A Reader’s History, from Aesop to Harry Potter* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), John Stephens’s *Language and Ideology in Children’s Literature* (London: Longman, 1992), Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Prichard’s *The Oxford Companion to Children’s Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984), and Peter Hunt’s *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1992) are all excellent sources in the robust and ever-expanding field of the history of children’s literature and the links between ideology and children’s literature.

<sup>3</sup> While Jenkins argues primarily about realist novels—teenagers who go to high school and worry about prom—I am writing about young adult urban fantasies. While they are speculative fiction, then, each of the series I’m dealing with is also urban and depicts a contemporary teenager, even if that teenager has magical abilities or fights demons on a day-to-day basis.

power,<sup>4</sup> YA also is a powerful and relevant force that both reflects contemporary cultural values and has the power to change how YA audiences perceive issues, identities, or situations. Specifically, YA has recently begun to portray more broadly queer<sup>5</sup> adolescent sexualities, to greater or lesser successes. By analysing how queer youth are constructed in three contemporary series—Cassandra Clare’s *The Mortal Instruments* series, Sarah Rees Brennan’s *Demons* trilogy, and Holly Black’s *Modern Faerie Tales*—I work to trace the patterns that emerge in all three series, and to differentiate between contemporary YA and its literary precursors. The trends in contemporary fiction, whether poisoning, supernatural parallels to coming out, or heteronormative jokes, all work to reinforce normative notions of LGBTQ sexuality. Thus, while a large part of my task is to show the many ways in which YA with queer characters has diversified and worked to wrest itself away from the stereotypical tropes of the past, I also hope to show where YA has to go and the structures to which it must turn a critical and self-examining eye.

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<sup>4</sup> Few teenagers today read the books outlined in Christine Jenkins’s and Michael Cart’s history and analysis of gay YA (*The Heart Has Its Reasons*) because, while potent in their day, the novels are out-dated and often showcase culturally backwards viewpoints.

<sup>5</sup> I use the term “queer” primarily as a shorthand for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, and queer (LGBTQ) persons. Occasionally, I will use LGBTQ, or simply gay, as an identity marker for characters who experience same-sex attraction. While “queer” is often used as an academic and critical term—and, indeed, I will be employing it that way in a limited sense in my first chapter—it has been adopted as an identity marker by many LGBTQ persons. In the critical sense, to queer is to point out the constructedness of gender and sexuality; a queer character thus works to illuminate the hidden social scripts underlying texts. Using queer in this way has been useful for me in writing my theoretical chapter; however, as an identification, “queer” is often preferable to the term “gay” because it is a *flexible* designation. One can be queer and feel opposite-sex attraction; one can be queer and asexual. A queer individual might violate gender norms or simply refuse to be labelled by a heterosexist society. However, my approach to analysis and reading are not academically queer per se, as I have chosen a structuralist approach instead. Thus, while I use the vocabulary of queer criticism, my own approach involves more close reading and a differentiation between transgressive and non-transgressive portrayals in order to determine structural changes in the way certain YA fiction has approached queer teen sexuality.

YA is typically didactic because adolescence is often perceived as a time of growth.<sup>6</sup> This didacticism arises in young adult literature in much the same way as in children's literature, which is often meant to teach morality.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Jenkins claims that this very "didactic tradition of mass market books for young readers leaves scant room for postmodern multiple identities or inconclusive endings" ("Queer" 326). The sense that teen readers search out books to learn something about the world or about themselves is particularly prominent in the scholarship surrounding YA and sexuality,<sup>8</sup> as LGBTQ

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to distinguish here between children's literature and young adult literature, and how each body of work intersects with sexuality and queerness. Children's literature is, as recent work shows, often surprisingly queer. Kathryn Stock Bond, in her monograph devoted to the subject of queerness and children, notes that children are tacitly constructed as simultaneously asexual and heterosexual (4, 6-7). However, also common in the representation of children is an implicit queerness—children often represent hidden and repressed sexualities. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley note that the child is "a metaphor, a kind of ground zero for the edifice that is adult life and around which the narratives of sexuality get organized" (xiii). Kenneth Kidd similarly argues: "Despite the prevailing sentiment that the homosexual and the child are worlds apart, they seem to be linked, particularly in literature and social science" (116). Tracing queer children back to even Lewis Carroll's Alice would suggest that the representation of queerness and children's sexuality has a long history (Bruhm and Hurley xi, xv-xix). However, teenage sexuality is another matter entirely. As aforementioned, children are understood to be largely asexual. Youth, unlike children, are constructed as necessarily *sexual*. Their sexualities must be regulated in much the same way that queer sexuality must be regulated (Foucault 37). Adolescence is a time during which sexual feelings often develop. Thus, while there is a substantive body of work on queerness and the child, and queer children's literature, the same cannot be said for teenagers. The queer teenager is a threatening figure: he or she has deviant sexual urges and is, if Gloria Filax is correct in her assessment that queer teenagers are understood to be participating in sex acts, acting on those same impulses. Conversely, the queer child's queerness can be understood usually to be an asexual (or, at least, an asexualized) type of difference. Thus, while the body of work on queerness and children is robust and excellent, it is of limited use to this project.

<sup>7</sup> Alison Ching argues that this type of obvious moral instruction is actually a turn-off for teenage readers who can, she quips, "smell anything with a condescending 'message' a mile off." (193).

<sup>8</sup> In her monograph *Queer Youth in the Province of the 'Severely Normal,'* Filax notes that the field of youth studies already couples adolescence with emerging sexuality, but in the case of queer youth that link is cemented: "When a youth identifies as homosexual, it

youth may not know any other queer people and thus turn to fiction to role models and a sense of community.<sup>9</sup> However, Jenkins notes that queer teens turning to YA for information about sex will “get very little” as “fictional gays and lesbians seem to have *extremely* limited sex lives” (“Novels” 153, 152); Jenkins and Michael Cart make similar observations in their survey of YA with queer content (34); and Roberta Trites argues that making “the sex act ... interstitial” can work to elide positive queer identifications (145). While YA may be meant to instruct, then, and a wide variety of cultural products—obviously queer or not—are utilized by queer teens as a way to explore their identities and orientations (Lipton 163), the representation of and engagement with queer sexuality within the sphere of contemporary YA publishing appears limited. As Catherine Tosenberger argues, “there is still a strong imperative [in YA] towards pedagogy—inculcating ‘correct’ attitudes about sexuality to an audience deemed in need of education” (188); yet, as Mark Lipton points out, “[m]edia representations of queer youth are scarce” (171). The tension here is clear: YA is simultaneously meant to instruct (or, at

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is assumed that she or he is sexually active, whether s/he has had an actual sexual experience or is simply making an identity claim” (46). Sexuality is thus fundamental to youth. As Susan Moore and Doreen Rosenthal, in *Sexuality in Adolescence*, write:

All theories of adolescent development give sexuality a central place in negotiating the transition from child to adult. The nascent sexual urges that emerge at puberty must be blended with other aspects of teenagers’ lives and channelled adaptively. It is especially important that the adolescent be able to integrate his or her sexual feelings, needs, and desires into a coherent and positive self-identity, which contains, as one aspect, a sexual self. (2)

Sexuality is thus constructed as a crucial part of a youth’s development and is seen as one of the firmest markers of queerness.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Lipton explains that “queer reading practices help young people explore the links between pleasure and power, between the body and subject, in the formation of a queer identity” (163). These reading practices are, he further argues, often employed by queer youth as a means through which they can come to better understand themselves.

least, it is read by teenagers who hope to gain instruction), but it cannot be clear or explicit when representing queer sexuality or sex acts.

Even with the elision of explicit sexual acts from nearly all YA texts, YA is often challenged on the basis of being *too* sexual or *too* gritty and true-to-life. This is something author Sherman Alexie has noted. His novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* has been widely subject to parental attacks as it bluntly depicts death, suicide, poverty, drug use, and masturbation, as well as tackling racial tensions and the identity politics surrounding American Indian reservations. Literary critic Meghan Cox Gurdon, for instance, argues that contemporary YA is “too dark,” citing Alexie’s book as an example of a frequently-challenged book (Gurdon). However, Alexie counters her accusation by explaining that the books that matter to teenagers are those that grapple with the hard-to-publish issues. He writes that those are the books that appeal to and speak to troubled teenagers:

[T]here are millions of teens who read because they are sad and lonely and enraged. They read because they live in an often-terrible world. They read because they believe, despite the callow protestations of certain adults, that books[—]especially the dark and dangerous ones[—]will save them. (“Written in Blood”).

While YA has always tended to address contemporaneous issues, its current willingness to grapple with complex realities and harrowing events is relatively new, at least to the extent that it addresses these realities with explicit detail.

Author Malinda Lo, whose novels *Ash* and *Huntress* both focus on lesbian characters, has compiled statistics about the American publishing industry and its

publication of LGBTQ characters from 1969 to 2011. Her data does not only include novels that have queer protagonists; instead, any novels that present a LGBTQ character, secondary or primary, good or evil, counts in Lo's data. Despite some outlying years, such as 2010, Lo's data indicates an upswing, a curve toward more LGBTQ representation.<sup>10</sup> That previously unpublishable representations of varying experiences can now be published, including the lived experiences of LGBTQ youth, indicates that the genre has changed tremendously, and quite recently. While I tend to agree with Jenkins that YA has previously been quite limited ("Novels" 152-153), recent literature seems to address many of her concerns. Portrayals of non-normative sexual and gender identities outside of the realm of the clearly bifurcated gay-straight divide (and even beyond traditional gender demarcations) are published far more frequently. Indeed, I would argue that much contemporary YA openly engages with the notions of "postmodern multiple identities" and "inconclusive endings" that Jenkins finds missing in YA fiction up through the 1990s ("Queer" 326).

Whether this change works to increase exposure to non-normative identities or to reinforce normalizing constructions remains to be adequately addressed and analyzed. The same books that Gurdon criticizes and Alexie defends—"problem" novels that tackle culturally-relevant issues with an unflinching attention-to-detail—both affirm the cultural construction of identities and shift the ways in which readers think about those same concepts. The line between what can and cannot be represented thus remains unclear, which is why, as Trites argues, it is particularly helpful to use discursive analysis to

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<sup>10</sup> Until 1994, there were always fewer than ten books with LGBTQ characters published in America. Most recently, namely in 2007 and 2009, nearly forty books with queer characters have been published. The overall curve of the chart resembles an exponential curve more than linear growth.



understand the implicit ideologies in YA that figures queer teen sexuality (149). It is not enough to write novels that represent, whether that representation is of non-normative identities, sexual abuse, self-mutilation, among other experiences. Each YA novel carries, at its heart, an implicit or explicit ideology,<sup>11</sup> a way of figuring the world. This is why, as both Jenkins and Trites argue, early YA novels featuring gay characters were often problematic: gay characters were always miserable; someone usually died in a car crash;<sup>12</sup> queer sexuality always met with narrative punishment (Cart and Jenkins 21-22, Trites 148). As Lo notes, more than half of the queer characters that see publication are also male, and most are white, able-bodied, and cisgender.<sup>13</sup> These tropes were—and are—culturally predicated myths that arose from contemporaneous thinking about queerness, and also influenced—and influence—how readers thought about gay and lesbian sexualities.

To better understand how YA both reflects and constructs the contemporary cultural understanding of queer teen sexuality, then, and to better grasp how YA has changed the way it represents queer sexuality—particularly considering that, up until

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<sup>11</sup> I use the word “ideology” to denote a set of ideas that determine how one figures the world. Throughout, I refer to ideology as something that does not operate through a top-down model; rather, ideology arises from cultural struggle. Antonio Gramsci notes two particular ideas that resonate with my work: first, that publishing houses are among the most “prominent and dynamic part[s]” of ideological systems; and, second, that elite ideology can be undermined through “complex ideological labour” by the masses (16). Gramsci’s understanding of ideology, then, lends itself to a more complex interface between elite (in my case, heteronormative) and subaltern (in my case, queer) ideologies. Furthermore, the publishing industry become the battleground upon which many ideological and cultural battles are fought.

<sup>12</sup> This rather bizarre recurring motif, noted by Cart and Jenkins (21), also appears in contemporary gay YA, such as Nick Burd’s otherwise excellent *The Vast Fields of the Ordinary* (2009).

<sup>13</sup> Cisgender is the term employed to designate when an individual’s gender identity is aligned with their bodily presentation, as opposed to trans\* identifications.

very recently, most gay YA portrayed queerness with a shocking “consistency,” even while the cultural construction of gay and lesbian people has changed (Jenkins, “Queer” 305)—I will first construct a theoretical apparatus that deals with how discourse influences the social construction of teenage queerness. Four categories—scriptedness, context, importance, and sexuality—emerge as ways of dissecting how each narrative figures queerness. I will then deal with the history of gay YA in order to explicate the framework out of which my primary texts arise. In Clare’s series, angelic descendants fight secretly to keep demons from infiltrating our world. Protagonist Clary Fray falls in with these Shadowhunters and discovers that she is actually one of them; she struggles throughout the series in pursuit of Jace Wayland, a Shadowhunter extraordinaire, and to keep the world from falling to pieces. Brennan’s trilogy deals with the secret magical underbelly of England, where magicians partner with demons in an effort to gain immense power. This series features a rotating set of point-of-view characters and thus has no single protagonist. Black’s trilogy focuses primarily on an unfolding political battle between the Seelie and Unseelie faerie courts. The protagonist, Kaye, is a pixie changeling who falls in love with Roiben, the Unseelie Queen’s knight. While each series appears to address some of the normative trends Jenkins and Cart note in their monograph, three additional trends with troubling ideological ramifications also emerge: poisonings, supernatural parallels to coming out, and heteronormative humour. While each series fails in some sense to escape the ideological grounds upon which it is built, these failures indicate where YA has to go in its future, if it hopes to continue being socially progressive and relevant to today’s youth. Thus, in my first chapter, I outline my theoretical apparatus and the genre history from which my primary texts emerge; I then

show how those texts indicate that YA has improved as a mode of representing queerness and queer youth, and simultaneously indicate the ways YA still needs to grow.

In my subsequent chapters, I use the framework developed in the first section to analyze each series. While both Brennan and Black work to better YA's representations of queerness through a diversification of queer realities, Clare seems to reference some extremely stereotypical notions, particularly in the books that expand on the original three book story arc. Clare's primary gay character, Alec Lightwood, is miserable; he "feels far more pain than pleasure" because of his sexuality (Trites 148) and, although the original three book arc tries to use Alec's increasing acceptance of his queerness as a marker of character growth, that Alec's primary narrative arc deals with the pain his sexuality causes him makes use of the discursive link between queerness and pain. However, I will address why Clare's series appears to be less transgressive and attempt to mine the series for its potentially non-normalizing effects. Although *The Mortal Instruments* taps into recurring discursive constructions of queer sexuality, Clare's series still diversifies its portrayal of queerness: Clare includes a bisexual character, lesbians, and queer characters of colour in her series. By contextualizing *The Mortal Instruments* as a successful mass-market series, I will help explain why its ideologies are out-dated, but remain capable of having a positive impact on its audience. Both Brennan and Black, conversely, clearly work to queer the social scripts surrounding gay youth by respectively engaging with the performativity of social roles and by deviating from predominant discursive constructs.

The fact that gay characters appear in YA urban fantasy, a popular subgenre within YA, indicates that queer representation<sup>14</sup> is no longer relegated to so-called “problem” novels. That the proliferation of LGBTQ teen characters has spread to urban fantasy, a relatively new subgenre, is a hallmark of a general trend within YA as a whole. Gay characters are no longer represented solely in realist novels with the sole purpose of instructing young readers; instead, in YA urban fantasies, gay characters are integrated within the social context of the novels. The three characters whom I will discuss in later chapters—Cassandra Clare’s Alec Lightwood, Sarah Rees Brennan’s Jamie Crawford, and Holly Black’s Cornelius Stone—can at once address teenage experiences of queerness while being integrated into the social fabric of each story world. This holistic approach to representation is an improvement over the problem novels that isolated, and sometimes still isolate, queerness.<sup>15</sup> By tracing the history of queer YA and unpacking the implicit ideologies and discursive construction of queer sexuality in three contemporary series, it becomes clear that YA has improved in its portrayal of queer youth since its original foray in 1969, and that it has largely stepped away from the tropes that Jenkins and Cart identify as troubling; however, as cultural products, each series is also a product of the past. Each of the three series I examine taps into troubling trends in

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<sup>14</sup> Throughout, I attempt to distinguish between a representation of queerness, which is necessarily multivalence, and queer experiences. There is no singular queer experience; no queer people experience their queerness in the same way, nor can their queerness(es) be classified as *the same*. However, when using the noun “queerness,” I understand it as a collective noun. It takes up many experiences of queerness.

<sup>15</sup> Jenkins and Cart are careful to differentiate between “gay assimilation” and “queer consciousness” novels (xx). Gay assimilation novels function to other queerness by including a lone gay character in a sea of heterosexuality; this character’s queerness must be confessed and all queerness—that is, the ability to expose scriptedness—is removed. Queer consciousness novels, conversely, allow the queer character to exist in a web of social relations that do not function either to normalize or other said character, but attempt to recreate the social world’s complex communal connections.

some way, shape, or form. However, the growth remains clear: by turning a critical eye to Corny, Alec, and Jamie, I show that, although YA publishing still has room to grow, it has seen compelling queer teen characters into print and that representation is largely complex, transgressive, and innovative.

## **Chapter II: “More Than Coming Out Stories”: Contemporary YA, Queer Youth, and Literary Diversification**

In one of the many works she has written on the subject of the representation of queer youth in young adult literature, Christine Jenkins notes that YA literature almost always conforms to certain narrative strategies. Young adult literature tends to portray a teenaged protagonist grappling with “contemporary social issues” (“Queer” 299). By tracing the history of gay YA and unpacking the implicit ideologies and discursive construction of queer sexuality in three contemporary series, it becomes clear that YA as a genre has improved in its portrayal of queer youth since its original foray in 1969. YA has improved by diversifying its portrayal of queerness, by including queer characters who are content with their sexualities, and by engaging with the cultural tropes in which it is grounded. While this improvement is important, there remains room to grow: by making use of poisonings, homophobic humour, and drawing parallels between supernatural coming outs and queer coming out experiences, these novels subtly reinforce a heteronormative worldview, as well as making use of the discursive connections between illness and queerness. Young adult literature has not finished addressing the complexities of the social and cultural construction of queer sexuality and, much like the teenagers it features as heroes, the genre still has a great deal of growing to do.

In order to determine if the characters I am examining are effective and positive queer characters—that is, characters who both positively portray queerness and work to shift the staid and stereotypical social discourses surrounding queer teenagers—and to understand the ideologies implicit in their stories, I have constructed a method for queer

discursive analysis.<sup>16</sup> By combining Michel Foucault's thoughts on power and discourse with Judith Butler's understanding of queer theory and performance, I aim to expose the ways in which power and discourse function together to construct queerness, but also how queering can be used as a mode of resistance. Queer theory dovetails well with an understanding of discourse, in large part because, as Roberta Trites observes, queer characters often understand their queerness discursively (149). Indeed, since queer characters are "always already ... discursive constructs" (Trites 149), a queer discursive analysis may be the most effective means through which to understand the ideological implications of these characters. I additionally turn to the history of gay YA as a means of anchoring my discussion of queerness in the tradition that grounds all three contemporary series I analyze. Four categories—scriptedness, sexuality, importance, and context—allow us to determine whether or not a text reaffirms or deviates from previous social constructions in a way that diversifies the portrayal of queerness and thus the possible experiences of queerness, and allow us to illuminate discursive trends within YA.

### **i. Silence, Confession, and Queer Discursive Analysis**

Trites argues that discursive analysis is a potent tool for unpacking and understanding how queerness is represented in YA. She concludes, after her excellent analyses of several YA novels, that

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<sup>16</sup> My mode of discursive analysis is not affiliated with formal modes of discursive analysis. Instead, I look at how my primary texts narratively construct their queer characters and use that construction as the grounds for analysis. I will expand upon the specific ways I approach this analysis shortly.

gay YA literature necessitates the study of discourse because it is frequently predicated on the notion that human sexuality is determined by discourse and that discourse is power. In other words, Foucault's work is most useful to us in the study of gay YA literature if we use his theories to understand the ways in which the discourse of sexuality in Western tradition has influenced the depiction of gay sexuality. (149)

It is, Trites claims, Foucault's interest in the intersection(s) of discourse and power that makes *The History of Sexuality* a powerful theoretical framework with which we can interpret YA literature. However, while I agree with Trites, queer theory also proves an excellent apparatus with which texts can be ideologically unpacked. To that end, I incorporate Butler's contributions to queer theory, in particular her idea of the heterosexual imperative, the heteronormative matrix, and the precise ways in which queer performances threaten ideological sameness—in this case, the repeated invocation of the tropes surrounding queer youth in YA.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault famously lays out the importance of discourse in the social construction of sexuality. He writes:

The central issue ... is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. What is at issue, briefly,



is the over-all ‘discursive fact,’ the way in which sex is ‘put into discourse.’ (11)

The social stories that speak about gay teenagers construct queer adolescence; the institutional construction of queerness often emerges clearly within the publishing industry, a ground for telling stories that then resonate throughout youth culture and affect what can be said about LGBTQ teens. Foucault argues that the discursive construction of sexuality is a compelling field of study because it illuminates the ways in which power moves through social fabric, how power shifts from ideological control to “everyday pleasure” (11). The ways in which power affects everything from identification to cultural products are what Foucault terms the “polymorphous techniques of power” (11). These techniques take several forms in YA. First, sex is elided. Silence, Foucault writes, “functions alongside the things said” as part of discursive construction (27). Second, queer sexuality is figured along the axis of pain rather than pleasure: any pleasure is necessarily coupled with agony or doom (Trites 144-145). Queer sexuality cannot be spoken or named without falling back into the constructions that simultaneously render it abject and erotic (Butler, *Bodies* 110). Finally, the construction of heteronormative spheres—ones wherein queerness needs to be confessed or named, regardless of how practical this naming may be for heterosexual and heterosexualizing readers, wherein coming out is a necessary part of the novel—links into Foucault’s ideas about confession. He writes:

We have ... become a singularly confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide ... one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in

private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell to anyone else, the things people write books about. One confesses—or is forced to confess. (59)

Confessions, while liberating, are also constraining; they reinforce the structures of discursive power, because something must be confessed to an authority—to, perhaps, *the* authority, or the ideological authority that necessitates a confession.<sup>17</sup> Foucault furthermore points to the link between “truth and sex” in confession (61). In coming out, the individual confesses the “truth” about his or her sexuality, but this is a truth that may only exist through the act of confession; this truth must be confessed because characters are tacitly assumed to be straight until they identify otherwise.

Heteronormativity—the ideological matrix that inscribes all sexualities with heterosexuality and normalizes heterosexuality over and above other sexualities—and how it emerges in YA links Foucault's idea of confession with Butler's analysis of the heterosexual matrix. The heterosexual matrix, Butler argues, at once structures sexuality and gender; indeed, the two cannot be extricated. She writes:

For, if to identify as a woman is not necessarily to desire a man, and if to desire a woman does not necessarily signal the constituting presence of a masculine identification, whatever that is, then the heterosexual matrix

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<sup>17</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, “‘Closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentiates it” (*Epistemology* 3). The process of coming out requires a shattering of heterosexualizing silence, but that silence must first be in place as a regulatory practice in order for the speech act to have meaning. Confessing one's sexuality requires that one's sexuality is periphery, that it “accrues” silence.

proves to be an *imaginary* logic that insistently issues forth its own unmanageability. (*Bodies* 239)

The instability built into the heterosexual matrix is the basis of *queering*. To queer is to point to the ideological scripts that are normalized, illuminating their very scriptedness and, thus, their “*imaginary* logic.”<sup>18</sup> Jenkins, writing about queer characters in YA, notes that this very figure—the queerly gendered ghost who haunts heteronormative texts—is foundational:

The unspoken, undescribed, and invisible image is that of a man who is not a man, the woman who is not a woman—that is, the gay man or the lesbian. And if there are no self-identified gay men or lesbians present to provide a reality check for these myths, then the internalization of a rigid gender conformity seems almost inevitable. (“Queer” 318)

Perhaps the reason that queer characters appear so infrequently in YA has to do with the threat queerness poses to gendered and sexual matrices through which individuals are constituted. If the very inclusion of gay teen characters destabilizes gender codes, the maps that dictate sexual behaviour and gender roles, then those characters are somehow threatening to a heteronormative society. However, heteronormativity not only normalizes heterosexuality by representing heterosexuality widely; heteronormativity

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<sup>18</sup> In *Gender Trouble*, Butler articulates the text’s foundational questions, and her questions are the foundational questions of queer theory as well: “[H]ow do non-normative sexual practices call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis? How do certain sexual practices compel the question: what is a woman, what is a man? If gender is no longer understood as consolidated through normative sexuality, then is there a crisis of gender that is specific to queer contexts?” (xi). José Esteban Muñoz similarly argues that queerness requires a moving away from “self-naturalizing” social structures (25), while Biddy Martin makes a similar case, claiming that queerness “necessarily celebrate[s] transgression in the form of visible difference from norms that are then exposed to be norms, not natures or inevitabilities” (Martin 106).

also functions by othering queer sexuality. By requiring a coming out—however true to life—YA authors often reinforce the idea that people are straight until proven queer. The confession of queerness, then, normalizes heterosexuality and marginalizes queerness, even in its representation.

Although more queer characters make it into print in young adult literature today, this increase does not mean YA has become better or less normalizing in its approach to queerness. Representation is not enough: each representation carries ideological weight, a social or cultural script to which it conforms. Queer sexuality, and the discursive construction of sexual identity, is a repeated citational practice that must affirm the social script even in its deviation from heterosexuality. Butler argues “naming is at once the setting of a boundary and also the repeated inculcation of a norm” (*Bodies* 8). To claim queerness is to cite heterosexuality. Where does this leave young adult literature that represents queer sexuality? Certainly, heteronormative discourse is a very real problem for literature that aims to represent queerness in a way that will be helpful and positive for queer teen readers, as many critics argue it must (Ching 186; Cart and Jenkins 166; Battis, “Introduction” 2; Banks 35; Trites 144). If queer characters can never be written without pointing to their otherness, the very notion of inclusivity is troubled. Butler acknowledges that, within the queer rights movement, “the legitimation of homosexuality will have to resist the force of normalization for a queer resignification of the symbolic to expand and alter the normativity of its terms” (*Bodies* 111). In other words, as LGBTQ persons are become more socially accepted, they must also resist being normalized, as that normalization is a part of the same process that first othered queerness. The same can be said for YA: the attempt to resist a normalizing of queerness through heterosexuality is

necessary. The tension, then, is two-fold: queerness must resist heteronormativity, a resistance that struggles against being tamed (normalized within heteronormativity) and being othered. Queering, Butler claims, can either be the tracing of “the *formation* of homosexualities” and/or the examination of “the *deformation* and *misappropriative* power” ascribed to homosexuality (*Bodies* 229). The representation of queerness, then, even within limited social scripts, can potentially trace queer identification or point to the problems with that same identification; either act works to illuminate the scriptedness of sexuality and sexual roles. Trites suggests that “queer discourse in young adult literature creates contradictory discourses because of the way sexuality is defined by the relationship between power, knowledge, and pleasure” (144). Queerness can be represented and figured in multiple and apparently “contestatory” ways (Butler, *Bodies* 99). Each representation works with the larger cultural discourse either to queer—that is, to reveal the hidden discursive powers at work—or to further normalize the contemporary social understanding of sexualities.

My version of a queer discursive analysis of YA and its representations of LGBTQ teens, then, does several things. First, it searches out and points to the implicit ideologies at work in the text—these textual representations of ideology include how queer characters are introduced, described, and figured in the narrative of the story. Second, it assesses the merit of a text using four categories:

1. **Scriptedness:** This category determines whether a character conforms to existing social scripts and tropes (as grounded in the history of the genre), works with those structures to undermine them, or does something wholly divergent. In

Butler's figuration, the most effective type of piece would parody (queer) existing social scripts.

2. **Context:** This category aims to determine if the queer character is the only LGBTQ character in the cast, if he or she is surrounded by a supportive peer network, and if the character exists in a rich social fabric or is isolated. Ideally, a queer teen is not the only LGBTQ character in the series, and he or she is part of the cohesive story world instead of appearing to add "diversity" for diversity's sake.<sup>19</sup> While the notion that an adolescent must have a thriving peer group to be a healthy individual is restrictive and can elide many lived experiences, in the case of YA, the move away from representing queer youth as loners because of their queerness presents a deviation from cultural myths that serve to other queerness. Texts that diversify the representations of queerness and present other modes of queer lived experiences present an opening up of the discourse surrounding queer sexuality that is a potentially transgressive movement.

3. **Importance:**<sup>20</sup> Linked to the character's context is his or her relevance to the story. Instead of adding LGBTQ characters for the sake of having more "diversity" (a token inclusion), novels ideally will have gay characters who are

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<sup>19</sup> Jenkins and Michael Cart note that, much like early "social conscience" books that problematically dealt with the relationship between black and white characters through a white (and therefore privileged) lens, many YA books include gay characters in a way that "tell[s] the story from a mainstream heterosexual perspective" (172). While a heterosexual protagonist does not necessarily make a book heteronormalizing, that queer characters might be added for diversity's sake, just as token characters of colour were often added to diversify a novel (170), is troubling and works to reinforce the marginalization of queerness.

<sup>20</sup> Jenkins and Cart note that an ideal portrayal would not only avoid "negative depictions" but would include "realistic GLBTQ characters who are integral to the plot and whose stories even provide the novel's central narrative" (84), beyond the realm of the "problem" novel subset of YA.

important to the narrative. While an LGBTQ character may not be the protagonist and may have his or her own subplot (or be an antagonist), a character who appears to be included for reasons other than adding queer colour is vastly preferable.

4. **Sexuality:** This category aims to determine whether a queer character's sexuality is made visible or is elided. The representation and visibility of sexual acts (even kissing) and sexual feelings, weighted proportionally to the amount of sexuality seen with the other characters and to the character's own traits and/or identifications,<sup>21</sup> determines if LGBTQ sexuality receives an appropriate amount of narrative attention and space.

These four categories determine how queerness is figured in each series, the ideologies at work in that figuration, and whether the texts legitimize (without heteronormalizing) queer sexuality or reinforce old patterns of thought and identification. In order to determine if YA has moved toward a broader representation of queerness, to see if the social scripts surrounding queerness are no longer limited to a few character types and story arcs, it is necessary to create a means through which we can interpret and evaluate the representations of LGBTQ characters.

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<sup>21</sup> For example, a queer character could be asexual. While the characters with whom I am dealing appear to all be sexual, it is entirely possible that a homoromantic or panromantic asexual character would not participate in sex acts in a novel. This representation could be seen as the inclusion of non-normative identities rather than the elision of queer sexuality. It could, perhaps, be seen as the inclusion of queer *asexuality*.

## ii. “Doomed Unfortunates”: A History of LGBTQ Representation in YA

In *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-2004*, Jenkins and Michael Cart set out to trace the history of the representation of queer characters in YA. Initially, they set up a dichotomy between two types of representation: a stereotypical representation, relying upon tropes and cultural images such as “unfortunates doomed to either a premature death or a life of despair lived at the darkest margins of society,”<sup>22</sup> and a realistic or varied representation that includes “people of various ages, cultures, incomes, and perspectives, as the friends, family, neighbors, and mentors who are part of the social web of connectedness that teens of all sexual orientations navigate on a daily basis” (xvi). This distinction, while it undergirds all of Jenkins’s work and is a useful tool with which to separate and classify YA, carries with it its own problems. Jenkins and Cart are correct that representing queerness as a mode of being that will lead only to despair is troubling, and, indeed, the small fraction of YA that does contain queer characters almost always represents white, able-bodied, young men—certainly, a far cry from a diverse or accurate representation of the LGBTQ community. However, YA cannot be so simply separated into “good”—that is, instructional, varied, representational, a “mirrored” version of realities (xvi)—or “bad”—that is, stereotypical, misinformed, constraining—without an elision of the subtle cultural discourses at work within any representation of queerness. Even in its very resistance to predominant social scripts, any cultural product conforms to certain discourses. However, *The Heart Has Its Reasons* remains an excellent map for navigating the history of gay

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<sup>22</sup> George Chauncey’s seminal *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, contains a list of the cultural myths that seem to bleed through many portrayals of queer youth. They are the myth of isolation (2), the myth of invisibility (3), and the myth of internalization [of homophobia] (4).



teens in YA and how that representation has changed and how it has stayed the same. The problem with the conventions in the portrayal of queer youth are not always the conventions themselves: for example, many LGBTQ youth may find coming out to be a painful process. Rather, by constraining the types of story arcs queer characters have, YA often dictates and limits the types of experiences queer youth can have. By broadening its portrayals of queer experiences, YA can offer richer and more varied representations of queerness.

Jenkins and Cart explain that they use such distinctions between good and bad YA because of an assumption implicit in most literature aimed at adolescents. They write:

If some of our judgments seem harsh and some of our praise lavish, it is due to our continued belief in the power of books to help teen readers understand themselves and others, to contribute to the mental health and well-being of GLBTQ youth, and to save lives—and perhaps even to change the world—by informing minds and nourishing spirits. ... [W]e believe that what is stereotypic, wrongheaded, and outdated must be noted and what is accurate, thoughtful, and artful must be applauded. (xviii)

As mentioned in the introduction, academics exploring queer representations in YA often claim that theirs is a field of importance because the ways in which YA represents queerness have serious effects on queer youth (Ching 186; Jenkins, “Queer” 318; Trites 145; Battis, “Introduction” 1). Indeed, Cart and Jenkins go so far as to posit that giving “faces to GLTBTQ youth” may be “the key function” of YA with gay characters (91). I am somewhat inclined to agree with this idea: queer youth seek out stories in which they

can see themselves represented (Lipton 163). However, even in positive representations of queer youth, those novels that “must be applauded” due to their care and consideration, underlying cultural and sexual ideologies are still at work. In order to explore some of the implications of these ideologies and to map how YA has grown and where it still has to go, I will briefly trace the history of gay YA and unpack the ideological shifts that are evident in this history.

The first gay YA novel, *I'll Get There. It Had Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969), was like most of the YA novels of the 1970s and early 80s: a problem novel (Cart and Jenkins 17). In this particular novel, queerness is the problem driving the narrative; Jenkins and Cart also refer to this category as the “homosexual visibility” novel (xx). A homosexual visibility novel features a character not previously thought to be gay who is later revealed to be gay; the narrative subsequently focuses on his or her coming out and the issues that outness creates. In this type of novel, Jenkins and Cart write, “a previously homogeneous society is interrupted by the appearance of a character who is clearly *not* ‘one of us’” (xx). In a novel of this kind, then, queerness interrupts the heterosexual landscape, but it does so in a way that reaffirms heteronormativity: the queer teenager is “*not* ‘one of us,’” instead existing on the social periphery as an abjected other. The problem with the problem novel, so to speak, has a great deal to do with the homogeneity of its representations: by tapping into worn cultural tropes, and by strongly reinforcing a heteronormative construction of literature, the problem novel reinforces social stereotypes about what it meant (and means) to be gay. It simultaneously “rob[s] homosexuals of individuality” while reinforcing and reinscribing the discursive construction of queerness (Cart and Jenkins 18): to be gay necessarily means to be alone,

to be in pain, to be damaged. Even when early novels attempted to move away from the medical discourse that allied queerness with illness (Butler, *Bodies* 64), other cultural scripts emerged. William P. Banks notes that early YA novels with gay characters, though they represent conflicts that many queer youth deal with such as coming out, family rejection, bullying, and the very real pain of feeling like an outsider, reinforce the notion that “the experiences of being queer are only about these personal conflicts” and that “one’s sexuality is inherently controversial and conflicted” (35). Because early gay YA often features one-dimensional characters—a gay teenager whose only defining characteristics is his or her homosexuality and the pain that accompanies that queerness—these novels discursively repeat the notion that queerness is comprised entirely of pain.<sup>23</sup> At once an outsider who must be spoken into being and a reiteration of worn citational practices, the queer teenager of YA from the 1970s and early 1980s is both a troublingly simple and discursively loaded figure.

In the 1980s and 1990s, while there was some hold-over from the problem novels of the 1970s, YA as a whole shifted away from such clearly moralistic tales. Alison Ching observes that this change is “due in part to the changing cultural landscape”<sup>24</sup> and also a proliferation of issue stories across many different media (185). The growing unpopularity of problem novels may also have been partially due to YA’s growth as a genre of literature: it was in the 1990s that the first crossover novels—novels written for

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<sup>23</sup> This is not to say that being a queer teenager—or a queer person of any age—at the cusp of the 1970s was not an often painful experience. Certainly, that *I’ll Get There* was published the same year as the Stonewall riots merits note.

<sup>24</sup> Ching largely means that LGBTQ persons began to appear more frequently in cultural products and thus were—and are—no longer limited to problem novels (185). Jenkins conversely argues that this change, however small, has much more to do with the LGBTQ civil rights movement (305).

and marketed to teenagers *and* adults—began to emerge as real players on the market (Cart and Jenkins 43, 129). Crossover novels may have been less moralistic because they were meant to appeal to an older, more reflective audience, as well as addressing multiple audiences. In addition to a cross-generational marketing approach, YA novels also began to diversify: instead of only finding queer characters in novels explicitly about teenagers dealing with their own sexuality, new novels started featuring characters who were not the protagonist but who were gay. Jenkins and Cart write:

This trend of placing a certain distance between the teen protagonist and the story's GLBTQ content serves to both broaden *and* narrow the scope of GLBTQ YA literature. On the one hand, this distance allows a YA novel (which is, after all, a story told from a teen perspective) to include gay/lesbian characters of various ages, backgrounds, and relationships to the protagonist. On the other hand, this has meant that most of the teen protagonists in the novels of the 1980s have been heterosexual, so the reader is usually seeing the gay/lesbian character at a remove from the protagonist. (51)

In an increasing number of texts, gay characters appear who “‘just happen’ to be gay” (Cart and Jenkins 143-144). Cart and Jenkins classify this type of novel as a “gay assimilation” (xx): characters are gay and that is that. Queerness is not necessarily a source of narrative tension and, if it is, it tends to be a subplot, not the driving narrative force. Occasionally, novels will be both gay assimilation novels and “queer consciousness” novels (Cart and Jenkins xx), texts that contextualize queer characters in a web of social networks—sometimes among other queer characters, other times among

peers and family members—as opposed to the sole gay loner in a sea of heterosexuality. The ideological implication of these types of novels is clear: in a gay assimilation novel, queerness is normalized to a certain extent, but remains marginalized.<sup>25</sup> Queer consciousness novels arguably contain the greatest possibility for queering, as they can contextualize queerness in a way that destabilizes the cultural construction of queer sexuality as isolating and depressing (Chauncey 2-4). However, Cart and Jenkins are correct in noting that, while the developments in recent gay YA—and, indeed, the same developments that they discuss as occurring in the late 1980s and through the 1990s appear in the 2000s as well—can be seen as potentially positive by taking gay characters out of a niche market (128), novels that contain gay characters but feature a straight protagonist have their own issues. Narrative distance between the protagonist and queer characters can simultaneously work to diversify a cast of characters and reinforce predominant social scripts: this idea applies not only to queer characters, but also to characters of colour, disabled characters, and other minority characters. Indeed, Neil Shyminsky claims that, by containing queerness within a sidekick character, mainstream narratives may reinforce heteronormativity (292). Furthermore, Kirk Fuoss argues that “homosexuals are more often than not presented as characters in someone else’s story than narrators of their own life stories” (163). And, indeed, the mere proliferation of gay characters is not enough to indicate that YA as a genre is *better* than it used to be—number does not equal quality and, as previously mentioned, any representation carries

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<sup>25</sup> Jenkins and Cart point out that this type of novel is much like early novels that attempted to include racial diversity (170-173). To reiterate: token minority characters do not actually serve to diversify a cast, instead creating another type of marginalization.

with it implicit ideologies that can be hugely troubling and can reinforce subtle and staid notions instead of queering or pushing for change.

Additionally, Trites and Jenkins both argue that YA novels have not undergone a tremendous amount of change. Trites claims that contemporary gay YA novels bear “marked similarities” to their predecessors (144), while Jenkins explains that she is “struck by the consistency of my findings, given the changing social contexts in which they were published [over three decades]” (“Queer” 305). Certain myths about queerness, such as the myths of isolation, invisibility, and internalization that George Chauncey describes (2-4), “have been—and continue to be—prevalent in YA novels” (Jenkins, “Queer” 316). Though gay characters have witnessed a certain amount of “assimilation” (Cart and Jenkins 128), this movement is slow and not without its own problems. The very term “assimilation” ought to give clue to the ways in which representation can function as appropriation and normalization. As Jenkins notes, old myths and tropes continue to reappear in YA, even after the social construction of queerness has changed. Homosexuality may no longer be classified as a mental illness by the APA (*American Psychological Association*), but the social scripts surrounding queerness remain staid—this is particularly evident in young adult fiction. Ideologies are slow to adapt, even when official institutions such as the APA change their policies. Jenkins and Cart note several other failings in YA, even as YA is improving in its representation of LGBTQ teens:

And thanks to the growing visibility of gays and lesbians in motion pictures and especially in series television, YA literature is now also including more and more secondary characters who ‘just happen to be’ gay and whose sexuality is no longer presented as being a ‘problem.’

What advances remain to be made? Well, for starters we clearly need more GLBTQ books featuring characters of color, more lesbian and bisexual characters, more transgender youth, and more characters with same-sex parents. The literature, in short, needs to be more all-inclusive. (165)

Cart and Jenkins rightly identify that the preponderance of queer teens who make it into print are white, able-bodied males. Malinda Lo notes as much in her breakdown of the publishing industry and gay characters, observing that half of novels that feature gay characters contain only male characters, while, for the sake of comparison, only a quarter feature lesbian teens. Jenkins also writes that, in YA, “most gay/lesbian people [represented in publishing] are white and middle-class” (“Novels” 149). YA novels tend to feature either a gay male teen or a lesbian, but rarely suggest that lesbians might be friends with or even know gay boys (Cart and Jenkins 90). It remains that YA, as a form of mass media that repeats certain messages that normalize elite status, conforms to predominant social scripts about class, race, ability, and sex.

Just as Butler claims that queer communities must guard against appropriation (*Bodies* 111)—an unqueering of queerness, so to speak—so too must readers and critics guard against feeling that YA is vastly improved without a careful analysis of contemporary literature. Trites notes that

While these novels indicate that some sort of historical progression has occurred, they still have some marked similarities in the way that each of them uses a gay character to illustrate how the pain and pleasure inherent in human sexuality are discursively formed. Together, pain and pleasure

fashion a matrix of power in which each of the gay characters in these novels functions, and the degree of physical pleasure the character experiences is directly related to the contemporary social discourses of homosexuality at work in the character's culture. (144)

Thus, to truly understand if YA has improved, it is not enough to simply trust that, because it has moved from a niche and moralizing subgenre to proliferating in a variety of YA novels, the ideological undercurrents running throughout the literature have similarly broadened.

Since the publication of *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, several YA series have been published that work to diversify YA as a whole. Despite Jenkins's observations and the conservative trend of the publishing industry, therefore, the representations of LGBTQ youth have not stayed the same in contemporary texts. Although some novels repeat worn tropes about queer youth—that they are always lonely, doomed to suffer, that being gay or lesbian is the sole focus of a queer youth's existence—others texts work actively to shift the discourse surrounding queer teens. Jenkins claims that “these books may be viewed as reflections of mainstream social attitudes and beliefs about gay/lesbian people within the larger U.S. society” (“Queer” 306). Furthermore, Jeffrey A. Bennett argues that the “discursive mediation of LGBT lives has had a profound impact on the arc of cultural prospects” (458).

Though *The Heart Has Its Reasons* includes texts that were published as late as 2004, all of my primary texts have been published since then,<sup>26</sup> and together they paint a picture that indicates ideological shifts, while simultaneously nodding to or tapping into

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<sup>26</sup> Excepting Black's *Tithe*, which was published in 2004, but is not included in Cart's and Jenkins's bibliography of YA containing queer characters.



some of the persistent constructions both Trites and Jenkins reference. Though old social scripts emerge in all three series, as I will expand upon in my analysis of each series, all three also appear to address Jenkins and Cart's concerns about the lack of diversity in gay YA, the isolation of queer characters, and the often one-dimensional portrayals of queer life (165-166). Indeed, to reiterate: it is not necessarily the old scripts that are the problem, but rather that these scripts present a monolithic way of being queer. Tracing how these traits have shifted, and why certain myths persist, should help illuminate why *The Mortal Instruments*, the *Demons* trilogy, and *Modern Faerie Tales* at once provide a positive indication of growth and open up discursive spaces for YA to head toward. In *The Mortal Instruments*, for example, Alec and Magnus are the primary queer characters. Magnus identifies as bisexual and is of Indonesian descent, while Alec is gay and white. Later, Aline Penhallow, who is Chinese, introduces her girlfriend Helen to Clary and Jace (*CoLS* 24). In the *Demons* trilogy, however, both Jamie and Seb are white. Seb is able-bodied and lower class, while Jamie is wealthy but loses a hand at the conclusion of the series.<sup>27</sup> Finally, in *Modern Faerie Tales*, Luis is black, disabled, and lower class, while Corny is white. However, Corny is not conventionally attractive and he is lower class. In *Valiant*, Val's best friend Ruth is a lesbian. Thus, these YA series—published after Cart and Jenkins finished their work—each incorporate elements beyond the narrow scope Jenkins and Cart critiqued. Part of slow cultural change is to have absence noted, and that absence, or that void in the cultural environment, is a space that can then be filled. YA

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<sup>27</sup> Whether Jamie can be counted as disabled is something about which I am not certain. Jamie's loss of a hand may constitute a disfigurement rather than a disability, although Brennan is careful in her portrayal of disability just as she is careful in her portrayals of race and sexuality ("Default"). The injury could perhaps instead be seen as a narrative punishment, though not for Jamie's sexuality but for his growing addiction to magic (*Surrender* 342).

has , by and large, responded to the failures Jenkins and Cart note, although I do not mean to imply that their observations directly impacted the authors writing the three aforementioned series. Rather, a discursive space opened up and created the room for a diversification of LGBTQ characters.

This is not to say that contemporary YA always challenges normative assumptions, however. There remain certain discursive structures at work—poisonings, supernatural parallels to coming out, and homophobic jokes—that elide queer sexuality, that function to normalize heterosexuality (and thus to other homosexuality), and that fail to represent queerness as a unique and lived experience. Thus, while YA seems to be improving as a whole by including a broader cast of characters, there is still room to grow, and that space links directly into the way queerness is represented in society at large.

Three trends recur throughout *The Mortal Instruments*, *Modern Faerie Tales*, and the *Demons* trilogy that each indicate an ideology at work within the discourse surrounding gay teens: in each trilogy, gay teens are cursed or poisoned; a character's magical otherness parallels coming out as queer; and characters make jokes about other straight characters being gay. Poisoning and curses, while certainly part and parcel of urban fantasy as a subgenre, appear in all three series and are particularly attached to queer characters. Jamie bears a demon mark that, through complicated plot machinations, is contagious and fatal. Alec is poisoned by a demon when he attempts to prove his worth to Jace, the boy on whom he has a crush. Corny is cursed by a faerie in a twist on King Midas's touch: anything he touches withers and dies. By repeatedly figuring curses and poisonings brought on by sexual desire, these texts access the long history of allying

queerness with illness. Butler notes that “the homophobic construction of male homosexuality [is] as always already pathological ... such that AIDS is phantasmatically construed as the pathology of homosexuality itself” (*Bodies* 64). Linking illness with homosexuality works to pathologize queerness; however, there is also ideological movement away from the link between illness and queerness within the texts. In Corny’s case, he is cured through same-sex affection; similarly, Magnus senses Alec’s need and swoops in to save the day. This complex trend thus indicates that each author taps into, consciously or unconsciously, the discourse surrounding queerness, but that this use is not without redemptive moments.

A second trend that emerges in all three series is the drawing of parallels between acknowledging one’s supernatural side and coming out as LGBTQ. Both Kaye (*Modern Faerie Tales*) and Simon (*The Mortal Instruments*), though heterosexual characters, come out as a pixie and vampire respectively, while Jamie (*Demons*)—though he has been open with his family about being gay—has gone to great lengths to hide the fact that he is a magician. The issue with drawing parallels between Simon’s and Kaye’s experiences with coming out to the experiences of queer teens is that, while real readers are not liable to be vampires or pixies, queer teens need to cope with coming out in a very real way. Kenneth Kidd argues that “bodies and attractions are real and should not be trivialized,” while also noting that it is the simultaneously “stable and shifting” realm of identification that provides some of the most fruitful grounds for analysis (115). Thus, while coming out as a member of the LGBTQ community is a real and lived experience, the way in which coming out as magical is constructed in all three texts provides some complex constructions to analyze. While the parallels can function to trivialize the real experiences

of queer teens, they also provide a certain accessibility to the notion of being rejected because of how one identifies.

Finally, most prevalently in *The Mortal Instruments* but also, to a lesser extent, in the *Demons* trilogy, jokes and quips about being gay emerge to weave a heteronormative web wherein heterosexuality is constructed as the norm to the extent that being queer is so ridiculous as to be funny.<sup>28</sup> Jane D. Brown notes that heteronormativity is common in media products that represent LGBTQ youth: “Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth rarely find themselves represented in the mainstream media. Although a few of the youth-targeted programs ... have included gay characters, what some have called compulsory *heterosexuality* prevails” (2). This type of heteronormalizing exists in many cultural products in order to contain or tame queerness. Though I do not mean to suggest that either Clare or Brennan are actively trying to ensure that heterosexuality is seen as the norm—and, indeed, Clare has explained that she included Alec in her series to show that “the world we live in isn’t a heteronormative one” (*YA Reads*)<sup>29</sup>—by creating characters who tacitly assume heterosexuality to the point that cracking jokes about same-sex attraction is so ludicrous as to be funny, each writer does reinforce a heteronormative worldview. Shyminsky writes:

The queered sidekick, then, presents the audience of the superhero narrative with a middle location onto which their hidden—or, indeed, not so hidden—queer or perverse desires and fears can be relocated with the

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<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that the jokes in each series are not explicitly homophobic—i.e., they do not make use of slurs and are not attempts to make LGBTQ characters feel bad—and appear good-natured. However, they still function to marginalize queer sexuality within each series.

<sup>29</sup> Clare appears to mean “exclusively heterosexual,” as we certainly *do* live in a heteronormative world.

simultaneous effect of straightening the central narrative and preserving the superhero as a beacon of heteronormativity. (292)

By keeping queerness contained, these texts work together to reinforce a message of heteronormativity. They arise from a heteronormalizing culture and reinforce the notion that queerness is outside the realm of the normal.

Thus, while these contemporary series have diversified in a way that tends to match with Cart's and Jenkins's suggestions, each text taps into and uses certain trends that reinforce often non-transgressive constructions of queerness. Poisonings and curses emerge from the pathologization of queer sexuality (Butler, *Bodies* 64). Supernatural coming out stories become a trend as well, perhaps because contemporary realist portrayals of coming out are tired (Cart and Jenkins 166). As Kidd notes, coming out seems to be part of the larger picture in young adult literature, as part of the "intense period of sexual attraction, social rebellion, and personal growth" that makes up adolescence (114). The supernatural coming out may function as a replacement for the LGBTQ coming out, but that parallel can trivialize the real and lived experiences of queer youth. Finally, heteronormativity emerges in the form of apparently good-natured gay jokes that subtly reinforce the ideology that heterosexuality is tacitly assumed and that queerness is somehow non-masculine. This type of heteronormalizing both others LGBTQ teens *and* reinforces traditional notions of gender. While these three motifs can, perhaps, be classified as failures in representation, I find each of them compelling in that, together, they paint a picture of the new gaps in the discourse surrounding queer teenagers that need to be addressed. While diversity remains an issue—as Lo notes, at least half of novels that portray LGBTQ teens feature only males, and hardly any

characters are trans\* or genderqueer—many of Cart and Jenkins’s criticisms have been responded to by the cultural web of production.

### **iii. Conclusion**

YA, Kidd claims, is “extraordinarily receptive to lesbian/gay themes, largely because coming out is often described in the idiom of adolescence as an intense period of sexual attraction, social rebellion, and personal growth” (114). Jenkins and Cart argue that YA has room to grow, namely by becoming “more than coming-out stories” and by featuring “more stories about young people whose homosexuality is simply a given and who are dealing with other issues and challenges—emotional, intellectual, physical, social, developmental, etc. that are part of teens’ lives” (166). While the depiction of queer sexuality on the page leaves much to be desired, contemporary YA authors are moving in the right direction. As part of the larger cultural landscape, these three series help show how queerness is being constructed, and how that construction has changed. Because novels, particularly mass market novels, emerge in a cultural environment and are aimed to make profit, they tend to reflect the middle of cultural change (Gerbner 124-125). That there has already been such a shift toward greater diversity in gay characters, in terms of race, class, and gender within the same text, indicates that YA is a genre that is eager to grow and responds readily to change. By approaching YA with an eye to queer discursive analysis and an understanding of how texts emerge from and respond to their cultural and ideological environment, the connections between the texts become more meaningful, as they are reflections of how our society is thinking about queerness, and also indicators of where we have to go. As contemporary young adult literature opens up

to difference, it creates a space for positive and mutable representations of LGBTQ youth; that discursive space is growing larger all of the time, as the social scripts for queer teenagers multiply and diversify and present readers of YA with a much broader swath of queerness within which they can better understand themselves and others.

### Chapter III: “A Million Little Papercuts Every Day”: Queer Pain, Social Scripts, and *The Mortal Instruments*

Writing under the thinly veiled pseudonym “Cassie Claire,” Cassandra Clare began her writing career as a prominent contributor in the online Harry Potter fanfiction community between 2001 and 2006 (“Cassandra Claire”). Clare’s first professional series, *The Mortal Instruments*,<sup>30</sup> has been wildly successful. When it was first published in 2007, *City of Bones* made it to number eight on the New York Times Bestsellers List under Children’s Books (“Best Sellers: Children’s Books”). In 2010, each book in *The Mortal Instruments* sold more than 200 000 paperback copies—an impressive feat, given that *City of Bones* had been available for three years at that point (Robak). As a result of this tremendous success, Clare has thus far written eight books set in the same universe, including a prequel trilogy (*The Infernal Devices*), a sequel series that follows *The Mortal Instruments*, and, as announced in early 2012, another Shadowhunter series (*The Dark Artifices*) (Clare, “The Dark Artifices”). Beyond its tremendous commercial success, this series is also significant because it contains a gay hero who has become nearly as popular as the series itself. Alec Lightwood is a Shadowhunter who fights against demons alongside sister Isabelle and adoptive brother Jace Wayland. Originally reclusive, Alec meets warlock Magnus Bane and, over the course of the first three books, progresses toward a relationship with Magnus. In the following two books, Alec fights against feelings of worthlessness when he realizes that Magnus has had other relationships, is bisexual, and will live forever. Alec’s story arc is the most normative of the three series I

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<sup>30</sup> The series is made up of *City of Bones* (CoB), *City of Ashes* (CoA), *City of Glass* (CoG), *City of Fallen Angels* (CoFA), and *City of Lost Souls* (CoLS), with a final novel—*City of Heavenly Fire*—slated for publication in 2013. For brevity’s sake, I will be using the initials to indicate from which novel I have drawn evidence. See parentheses above, or List of Abbreviations Used (2), for the acronyms.



have examined, in that it does little to deviate from old social scripts: the original trilogy uses Alec's outness to mark his character growth, instead of any actual growth from the jealous and petulant teenager readers meet in the first book; and, in the subsequent books, Alec characterizes his queerness as immensely painful, thus allying queerness with pain in a way that Roberta Trites has identified as deeply problematic (143-144). Aside from tapping into all three of the trends I outlined in my first chapter (Alec is poisoned, male characters make homophobic jokes, and Clare draws a concrete parallel between Simon coming out as a vampire and coming out as gay), *The Mortal Instruments* is also substantially less transgressive than either Holly Black's *Modern Faerie Tales* or Sarah Rees Brennan's *Demons* trilogy in the four categories I use to determine efficacy: Alec conforms to a great many myths surrounding queer teens, as an isolated and self-loathing character; his importance to the plot is minimal and he is even largely absent for *City of Fallen Angels*; and, although Clare indicates that he is the only character having sex, his same-sex feelings are placed at tremendous narrative distance. However, the reach of the series cannot be denied and, while not as transgressive as either Black's or Brennan's series, *The Mortal Instruments* still marks a change in young adult publishing and is a firm step in the right direction by including queer characters of colour, a bisexual character, and queer men and women in the same universe.

#### **i. Invisible Things: Queer Pain and Isolation**

In *The Mortal Instruments*, Clary Fray is drawn into a secret society of demon slayers called Shadowhunters. One of the three Shadowhunter teenagers she meets is Alec Lightwood. Alec is dark, brooding, and initially has nothing but thinly veiled

contempt for Clary. In their first genuine interaction, Alec is described as being “slumped down in the chair as if he hoped nobody would notice him. ... [His eyes] gazed at Clary with a hostility as pure and concentrated as acid” (*CoB* 68). Alec wears tattered and worn clothes and plays second fiddle to Jace’s prodigious strength and ability. The bond he and Jace share is a type of fighting partnership—they are *parabatai*, a vaguely psychically-bound fighting pair—but Alec tends to hang around in the background. Jace quips to Clary later that Alec has “never killed a demon ... I don’t know why not. Maybe because he’s always protecting Izzy and me” (*CoB* 134). However, Alec’s reticence and his contempt for Clary are largely rooted in the same issue: Alec has feelings for Jace, which he tries desperately to hide, and he thus sees Clary as a threat. Indeed, Clary later insightfully exclaims that, “You can rant all you want about honor and honesty and how mundanes don’t have any of either, but if *you* were honest, you’d admit this tantrum is just because you’re in love with him” (*CoB* 276). And while readers later learn that Jace has seen through Alec’s act and, indeed, shows Alec that his feelings for Jace are an illusion (*CoG* 131), Clary almost immediately identifies Alec’s sexuality for the readers. In an exchange with Isabelle, she asks:

“Is Alec gay?”

Isabelle’s wrist jerked. ... “How did you guess?” she said finally.

“I—“

“You absolutely can’t tell anyone,” said Isabelle.

“Not even Jace?”

“Especially not Jace!”

“All right.” Clary heard the stiffness in her own voice. “I guess I didn’t realize it was such a big deal.”

“It would be to my parents,” said Isabelle quietly. “They would disown him and throw him out of the Clave—“

“What, you can’t be gay and a Shadowhunter?”

“There’s no official rule about it. But people don’t like it. I mean, less with people our age—I think,” she added, uncertainly. . . . “But the older generation, no. If it happens, you don’t talk about it.”

“Oh,” said Clary, wishing she’d never mentioned it.

“I love my brother,” said Isabelle. “I’d do anything for him. But there’s nothing I can do.” (*CoB* 197-198)

Alec’s sexuality is an issue that must be named to be known, even if Isabelle can only refer to his queerness as “it.” Furthermore, Alec’s need to be in the background and his certainty that Magnus will leave him because he is not worthwhile indicate a level of self-hatred (*CoLS* 73-74), one of the myths identified by George Chauncey (4). Indeed, it is Alec’s extreme anxiety about coming out that characterizes much of his story arc in the first three books: most of Alec’s conflict comes from his desire to be with Magnus, but his fear of any one knowing about it (*CoA* 261-262, *CoG* 222-223). Alec’s reticence to talk about his sexuality does several things: first, his loner status and passivity tap into social scripts that, as Christine Jenkins notes (“Queer” 316), are prevalent in YA; second, by choosing to make Alec’s coming out journey about fear of rejection, Clare couples queerness with feelings of anxiety. This troubling construction is made worse when Alec describes, in *City of Lost Souls*, what it is like to be queer:

“Iz,” Alec said tiredly, “It’s not like it’s one big bad thing. It’s a lot of little invisible things. When Magnus and I were traveling, and I’d call from the road, Dad never asked how he was. When I get up to talk in Clave meetings, no one listens, and I don’t know if that’s because I’m young or if it’s because of something else. I saw Mom talking to a friend about her grandchildren and the second I walked into the room they shut up. . . .” He shrugged and looked toward Magnus, who took a hand off the wheel for a moment to place it on Alec’s. “It’s not like a stab wound you can protect me from. It’s a million little paper cuts every day.” (390)

Alec cannot even name the “something else” that alienates him from his society. For him, being gay is like slowly being cut to pieces—agonizing and unstoppable. Indeed, at the end of *City of Lost Souls*, Magnus calls their relationship off and Alec is left isolated, in pain, and literally standing in the dark (510-511). While it is impossible to say what will happen to Alec in the final book of the series, since it is yet to be published, Alec’s queerness thus far has been hardly anything but pain for him, and that construction is tremendously troubling because it discursively links queerness exclusively with pain.

The manner in which the series contextualizes queerness is less normative, however, and Clare includes a network of support around Alec, as well as including other queer characters. Because Shadowhunter society is fundamentally homophobic, Alec struggles with feelings of loneliness and isolation. Even his sister seems reluctant to talk about his queerness, although she “love[s]” him and would “do anything for him” (*CoB* 198). However, Alec meets High Warlock of Brooklyn Magnus Bane in *City of Bones* and is drawn to the warlock. Magnus, unlike Alec, is fearless; his powers are immense

and the Shadowhunters repeatedly enlist his help to solve the problem of the hour. And, indeed, Alec seems willing to offer sympathy to Magnus that he is unwilling to offer himself: when Magnus describes how painful it was to be rejected by his father because he has demonic parentage, Alec says quietly that “It wasn’t your fault ... You can’t help how you’re born” (*CoB* 216). The rhetoric here clearly draws a parallel to much of the rhetoric about being born gay, but additionally taps into the second trend—supernatural parallels to coming out—that I have identified. Meeting Magnus provides Alec simultaneously with a love interest and with an outside perspective through which he can better understand his own sexuality. It is his relationship with Magnus that propels him to become more independent, a self-determining social agent. Furthermore, in *City of Fallen Angels*, readers briefly encounter a lesbian character and her girlfriend. Alec is not the series’ only gay character and, despite his fears about social rejection and, later, his father’s rejection because of Alec’s sexuality, most of those around Alec accept him. Still, the predominant feelings with which Alec struggles are feelings of anxiety and isolation. The tension in his relationship with Magnus derives, once he has come out, from his fear of growing old while Magnus stays young: Magnus is immortal, a fact that creates distance in their relationship (*CoLS* 61).

It is in the representation of sex that *The Mortal Instruments* fails most seriously. Although Clare has written a scene describing Alec and Magnus’s first kiss, it is published only on her website (“Special: Kissed”). However, this happens outside of the canonical series. By employing a method to add queer content to her texts that fanfiction writers have been using for decades, Clare supplements her own text, because evidently her series cannot contain much of a representation of queer sexuality. Although all five

books describe, in painstaking detail, Jace and Clary as they kiss and touch time and time again—even when they believe they are siblings—Alec’s feelings are limited to happening off-page. After a conflict between Alec and Magnus, Alec chooses to kiss Magnus publicly, at once announcing that his same-sex attraction and his feelings for a Downworlder. The scene, like all descriptions of Alec’s sexuality, happens at a distance:

“But—“ Maia, still looking over at Alec and Magnus, broke off and raised her eyebrows. Simon turned to see what she was looking at—and stared.

Alec had his arms around Magnus and was kissing him full on the mouth. Magnus, who appeared to be in a state of shock, stood frozen. Several groups of people—Shadowhunters and Downworlders alike—were staring and whispering. Glancing to the side, Simon saw the Lightwoods, their eyes wide, gaping at the display. Maryse had her hand over her mouth. (*CoG* 387)

Simon does not realize what has happened initially, but he cannot help staring. The rhetoric Clare employs further distances the kiss: Alec “was kissing” Magnus, who “appeared” to be shocked. That the kiss is witnessed from far away and that “appearing” is emphasized distances the reader from the kiss. The passage additionally highlights the widespread shock that such an embrace causes; indeed, the passage excerpted above describes only the “shock” and the stares Alec and Magnus’s embrace causes. This transition, and the tight focus on the social repercussions of Magnus and Alec’s kiss, effectively negates any eroticism a reader might feel when reading the scene. While Alec’s immediate action may appear courageous to readers, Clare focuses on the social ripples his queerness causes instead of his feelings. That being said, in both *City of Fallen*

*Angels* and *City of Lost Souls*, neither Isabelle and Simon or Clary and Jace—the two primary couples, and also Alec’s two siblings—are having sex. Though Clare details their kissing and, in the case of vampire Simon and Isabelle, their blood sucking in great detail, husky voices and moaning included, neither couple moves beyond cuddling in bed. Conversely, though the scenes inevitably transition to black before much is described, readers are left with little doubt that Alec and Magnus are sexually active. One such scene concludes: “‘Well, if you’re going to wake me up,’ [Magnus] said, ‘you might as well make it worth my time,’ and he pulled Alec down on top of him” (*CoLS* 260). While each scene inevitably is cut short, the indication that Alec and Magnus are, out of all the other couples, sexually active may counter the elision of queer sexual pleasure. This choice is interesting in its double movement: Alec is at once unsexed (his desires are never described) and sexed (he is the only character with fade-to-black scenes). This tension is surprisingly common: queer teen sexuality is the thing that at once cannot be talked about—sexual pleasure cannot make it onto the page (*Trites* 144)—and yet queer teens are hypersexualized, their identities assumed to be tied to sexual acts (*Filax* 46).

Finally, in terms of importance to the story, Alec, while a secondary character whose actions are far less glorious or capable than Jace’s, does occasionally take control of the narrative. In each book, small sections are focalized through Alec, though, again, his feelings are not explored or highlighted particularly. Most of his romance with Magnus takes place outside of the text and is deciphered by other characters and put together in small snippets sprinkled throughout the novels. Indeed, when readers do see serious emotional depth in Alec and Magnus’s relationship through Alec’s eyes, it is when Magnus ends their relationship or when Alec is dealing with his feelings of intense

jealousy. In each case, Alec feels pain. Sections from Alec's point of view tend to further the plot—to provide a glimpse into a scene where the reader would not otherwise have access—instead of adding emotional depth. And when Alec does show emotional depth, it is almost always heart-wrenching pain. Magnus is arguably of more import to the plot, as a powerful warlock who seems to be on call to help Shadowhunters with whatever problems they seem to be dealing with on any given day, but he never takes control of the narrative. Indeed, both Alec and Magnus are absent from the first two thirds of *City of Fallen Angels*. Even once Alec returns, he spends most of *City of Fallen Angels* and *City of Lost Souls* feeling sorry for himself because Magnus is bisexual, has had other lovers, and is immortal while Alec is not. Alec's story arc is primarily concerned with his queerness: meeting Magnus, falling in love, travelling, feeling jealous and sad, and breaking up, and that plot is extraneous to the series as a whole. Though Clare uses the trajectory of the first three novels and Alec's coming out as indicators of his growth as a human being, Alec's importance is almost entirely limited to his sexuality.

Thus, *The Mortal Instruments* is normative in several regards: first, Alec taps into tropes about queer teens—that they are lonely, isolated, and subject to anxiety and pain—without criticizing or parodying that script. The social context surrounding Alec additionally conforms to normative portrayals of queerness, as he finds that coming out has caused him additional isolation and pain. Clare does, however, include understanding friends and a lesbian couple. While Alec is of little importance to the plot, and his story arc is almost entirely concerned with his sexuality, he is one of the few sexually active characters and Clare does include brief depictions of kisses, even if they are largely at a distance and pale in description and sheer volume to the heterosexual encounters



described throughout the novels. *The Mortal Instruments* fails, in many ways, to transgressively represent queerness. However, it is worth noting that the series is tremendously popular, as noted above, and that many teens who may never have encountered a gay character before are reading about Magnus and Alec. This, Jenkins and Michael Cart argue, may help to expose young readers to a broader and more inclusive portrayal of their own culture (91-92). But the discursive construction of queerness in the series leaves much to be desired and, more than any other series with which I am working, taps into the old scripts in normative ways. Additionally, *The Mortal Instruments* makes use of all three negative trends—poisoning, supernatural coming out, and gay jokes—and, in the latter two categories, fails most seriously out of all three series I have examined.

## ii. “I guess you’re coming as my date”: Heteronormativity and Queer Poisoning

In *City of Bones*, Alec is demonically poisoned; this makes use of the cultural connection between queerness and disease. Although, as I will expand upon in my next chapter, Brennan’s Jamie Crawford experiences a curse that is, perhaps, more explicitly linked to contagion and thus AIDS, Alec’s poisoning still taps into the discursive links between queer desire and illness. Throughout *City of Bones*, Alec is put on edge by Clary’s relationship with Jace. Because Alec and Jace have a fighting partnership, a ritualized and magical relationship that links them deeply, and also because Alec harbours feelings for Jace, he feels incredibly betrayed when Jace repeatedly chooses Clary over Alec. After Jace takes Clary to an abandoned and vampire-infested hotel, Alec looses his anger at Clary: he exclaims that she does not “[k]now him. *I* know him,”

adding that he is enraged because “he *left me behind!* ... Normally I’d be with him, covering him, watching his back, keeping him safe” (*CoB* 275). This feeling of betrayal, of an unrequited queer attraction, leads to Alec’s demonic poisoning: when the group tracks down the Mortal Cup, they are attacked by a greater demon, and Alec is desperate to prove himself and to prove his worthiness.

The demon struck, its razored hand lashing down at Jace. Jace staggered back, but he was unharmed. Something had thrown itself between him and the demon, a slim black shadow with a gleaming blade in its hand. Alec. The demon shrieked—Alec’s featherstaff had pierced its skin. With a snarl it struck again, bone-talons catching Alec a vicious blow that lifted him off his feet and hurled him against the far wall. He struck with a sickening crunch and slid to the floor. (*CoB* 325-326)

Alec is described as a “slim black shadow,” a force of “something.” In his moment of courage, Alec loses his face. The moment is atypical for Alec’s character: Alec has never killed a demon and, indeed, his weapon of choice is the bow and he tends to stay back and fight from a distance while Jace flies into the fray. However, spurred on by a sense that he is losing Jace—that is, motivated by unrequited queer desire—Alec puts himself in danger. After the attack, his face is “white” and “freckled with drops of blood” (*CoB* 328). He can barely speak, except to ask if he killed the demon: his desperation to prove himself, to show Jace that he is worthwhile, speaks to a profound insecurity, an underlying feeling that he is fundamentally inadequate. Though Alec comes close to death, he is ultimately salvaged by Magnus Bane, his love interest. The warlock just “showed up and ordered everyone out of the room and shut the door,” later sitting “by

Alec's bed all night and into the morning" (*CoB* 435). He is not asked to come, instead simply appearing to save Alec's life. Thus, while Alec may come close to death because of his queer desires, he is also saved by the man with whom he later begins a relationship. This moment is similar to the recuperative affection that saves both Luis and Corny in *Modern Faerie Tales*, except that, for Corny and Luis, their moment is one of mutual breakthrough. For Alec, his poisoning, and Magnus's arrival to save the day, is not a cathartic moment and, indeed, the reader is not privy to any exchanges that occur between the two, as Clare only reveals that Magnus came after the fact and through Isabelle's recollection. It may be the misdirection of Alec's affection that results in his poisoning, but, in this instance, queer desire leads to illness.

Clare additionally makes use of the parallels between supernatural coming outs and queer coming outs. Immediately after Simon is turned into a vampire, Luke—a leader of a werewolf pack and a father-like figure to Clary—offers Clary a brochure to give to her friend:

"*How to Come Out to Your Parents*," she read out loud. "LUKE. Don't be ridiculous. Simon's not gay, he's a vampire."

"I recognize that, but the pamphlet's all about telling your parents difficult truths about yourself they may not want to face. Maybe he could adapt one of the speeches, or just listen to the advice in general—" (*CoA* 197)

That the idea that Simon might be gay is "ridiculous" and, indeed, that this type of disbelief lays the foundation for the numerous gay jokes that follow, indicates the implicit heteronormativity of the series. While Clary insists that the pamphlet will not apply

because Simon is absolutely straight, the parallels remain potent. After Simon tells his mother that he is a vampire and things go horribly wrong—Simon’s mother curses him and engraves Jewish holy symbols across the door to keep him out—Simon wishes that he had made use of the brochure (*CoFA* 58). The invocation of religion as a tool for rejection also echoes what many gay teenagers may experience. In any case, Simon has become an outsider in every way: he is, first, a vampire who does not fit into the human world; as a Downworlder, he cannot fit in with Clary and her Shadowhunter community; because he drank Jace’s blood, he can walk in the sunlight and is not part of the vampire community; and, finally, because he has been afflicted with the Mark of Cain, Simon is cursed to wander the earth, alone. While the curse is later lifted, Simon’s social positioning as an outsider marks him as different. His mother’s absolute rejection of him echoes what many LGBTQ youth may experience. However, Simon can charm his mother into forgetting the truth about who he is. Unlike Alec, whose queerness causes him tremendous pain, Simon’s vampirism makes him stronger and more attractive. When Isabelle Lightwood and Simon begin a relationship, they are met with little criticism, although it is apparently taboo for Shadowhunters and Downworlders to couple. Alec and Magnus, on the other hand, are rejected by Alec’s parents. Clare draws connections between Alec’s queerness and Simon’s otherness, but Simon’s own “coming out” does not function as an effective parallel.

As mentioned, the implicit heteronormativity of the series lays the foundation for homophobic jokes. When Jace stays with Simon in *City of Fallen Angels* and acts as his bodyguard, Jace jokes, in reference to Simon possibly drinking his blood that, “I think we’re better off as friends” (163). Jordan, Simon’s official bodyguard sent to him by a

secret society of werewolves, has to go with Simon to a celebration and, when Simon quips, “I guess you’re coming as my date now,” Jordan admits to being “secure enough in [his] masculinity to accept that” (*CoFA* 292).<sup>31</sup> Again, the notion that Simon could be involved with either Jace or Jordan is laughable and characters link queer relationships with a threat to masculinity—even if that threat is then laughed off. Both of these tactics serve to reinforce the normalization of heterosexuality and the othering of homosexuality. While David McInnes and Cristyn Davies insist that the “only way to maintain the fiction of a heterosexual masculinity in an intense homosocial context . . . is if same-sex desire remains unspoken” (107), in Clare’s novels, characters of the same sex who are put in homosocial contexts can joke about being gay because they are so thoroughly and fundamentally heterosexual. In fact, homosocial contexts are ideal environment for homophobic jokes. While there are few jokes about queerness in the original trilogy, the subsequent two books are rife with them, and that queer desire is fodder for jokes remains deeply troubling.

### iii. Conclusion

Clare’s series appears, in many ways, to reinforce old notions about queerness without creating new social scripts. Alec is miserable and isolated: although there are quite a few queer characters in the series, his feelings of isolation drive his narrative arc. Additionally, all representations of sexuality occur at a distance, although Clare indicates that Alec is the only character who is having sex. In a single movement, he is both sexed and unsexed. Alec’s importance to the series is secondary, and his story arc is

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<sup>31</sup> There are many other examples of this type of joking throughout both *City of Fallen Angels* (83, 300, 327) and *City of Lost Souls* (47, 124, 141, 220, 263, 389).

fundamentally grounded in his queerness: his character growth is entirely a movement toward outness, and then a struggle with his feelings of jealousy and worthlessness in his relationship with Magnus. Additionally, Alec is poisoned and, although there may be a moment of queer recuperation, it occurs at a distance and the reader is not privy to whether that same moment acts as a cathartic emotional experience. Clare furthermore draws ineffective and troubling parallels between Simon and Alec, and heteronormativity underscores the series' many quips about being gay.

However, as troubling as the implicit ideologies surrounding Alec may be, Clare also works to include some movement from the earlier YA criticized by Jenkins and Cart. Magnus is a bisexual man of Indonesian descent, while Aline Penhallow is a Chinese lesbian who has a girlfriend. In *The Mortal Instruments*, there is a diversification of what it means to be queer, even as Alec conforms to the scripts of the loner whose queerness causes him pain. Thus, while she at once conforms to normative scripts that have been accepted as social constructs of queer sexuality, Clare simultaneously opens the door for diverging portrayals. The full implication of Alec's story arc remains to be seen and will have to be determined once the series' final book is published.

Unlike either Brennan's *Demons* trilogy or Black's *Modern Faerie Tales*, *The Mortal Instruments* is a series fraught in its portrayal of queerness. Clare's characterization of Alec cannot be said to be transgressive, but the way in which she represents queerness is different and, in many ways, better than the representations criticized by Jenkins and Cart. Jenkins claims to be "struck" by the extent to which portrayals of queerness have remained the same ("Queer" 305), but the sameness of these portrayals ought not to be surprising: because ideology is informed by a citational

practice (Butler, *Bodies* 8), that similar characters who conform to these citations emerge is simply how the system functions. Thus, while Clare's Alec may fail as a force who moves the discourse surrounding queer teens forward, that she includes him at all, and that she includes other and diverse queer characters, speaks to a gradual progress within an industry motivated by profit.

#### **Chapter IV: Lavender Shirts and Earrings: Sarah Rees Brennan's *Demons* Trilogy, Parody, and a Huge Magical Badass**

Sarah Rees Brennan's *Demons* trilogy, comprised of *The Demon's Lexicon*, *The Demon's Covenant*, and *The Demon's Surrender*,<sup>32</sup> actively attempts to parody and thus undermine dominant social scripts about queer youth by tapping into the cultural constructions of queer teens with the express purpose of complicating and challenging those constructions. The series is Brennan's first professional publishing experience, although she is well-known for her involvement in the Harry Potter fandom as the well-known fan Maya ("Maya"). Given her past as a fan writer who created queer characters—queering the canonical source material with hugely popular and important fanfiction<sup>33</sup>—it is no surprise that Brennan tackled writing Jamie Crawford with a great deal of sensitivity to how she was portraying LGBTQ youth. This awareness manifests itself in the complexity she brings to the character and in that Jamie actively works against social scripts that would dictate how he behaves. However, Brennan's novels also tap into social discourses surrounding queerness by utilizing several of the trends outlined in the previous chapters: Jamie is cursed and that curse is contagious; Nick cracks jokes about queerness; and Mae attempts to draw a parallel between Jamie's coming out as gay and his coming out as a magician. Importantly, Brennan actively works to trouble the last of the three trends as Jamie angrily points out to his sister that being a magician is nothing like being gay. Indeed, Jamie articulates one of the fundamental problems with the connection between supernatural and gay coming outs: supernatural creatures pose a

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<sup>32</sup> I will abbreviate throughout as *Lexicon*, *Covenant*, and *Surrender*.

<sup>33</sup> Catherine Tosenberger claims that, "Potter fandom, due in part to its sheer size, but also to the great diversity of ages and sexual orientations of its members, is ideal ground for exploring many varieties of non-heteronormative discourses in fandom. Slash is therefore one of the most popular genres of Potter fanfiction." (186)



very real danger to human life within the world of the novels, while being gay certainly does not. By returning to the four categories I originally outlined for my queer discursive analysis—scriptedness, context, importance, and sexuality—it becomes clear that Brennan’s *Demons* trilogy simultaneously advances the representation of queerness by employing performance to highlight the scriptedness of Jamie’s role and by having him function as a key player in the series, and yet has room to grow away from the portrayal of queerness as illness and heteronormative discourse.

**i. “He’s harmless”: Femininity, Parody, and Lavender**

Jamie Crawford is a character who has been subjected to serious fan criticism because he is represented effeminately and stereotypically (Brennan, “Default”). Because he wears lavender and has an ear pierced, Jamie can be read as conforming to the stereotypes surrounding gay men. However, in an interview with *Diversity in YA*, Brennan explains why she used such social markers:

Some of my ideas were just about going beyond a [common] role, because some roles are true as far as they go, but people are so complex they never go far enough. Such as the gay guy who presents as weaker than other guys—what if he was physically weaker and smaller, and also quite deliberately presenting himself in a certain way, and also a *huge magical badass?* (“Stage”)

Brennan aims to engage with the expectations surrounding a character like Jamie, but the mixed fan reaction indicates one of the common problems with performance: parody can be read as the real thing, and can thus fail to illuminate the hidden structures underlying

that very performance.<sup>34</sup> Jamie is an excellent example of a character who, at first glance, seems to conform to very particular social scripts but then reveals that conformity to be, quite literally, a performance. In his very first assessment of Jamie, Nick tells Alan that the other boy is “harmless,” adding, “Trust me, if he was a magician, he’d be able to defend himself at school. He’s harmless. He’s useless” (*Lexicon* 10). On a second reading, this moment becomes extremely ironic: Jamie’s helplessness is the guise he uses to conceal his magical abilities. He is characterized first and foremost by the degree to which he is *non-threatening*. However, even in his supposed frailty, Jamie is a bit of a contradiction: Nick notes that Jamie “probably would’ve been less of a target at school if he hadn’t insisted on wearing lavender shirts and jewellery” (*Lexicon* 19). Jamie scares easily, cracks jokes when he is nervous, and puts up with near constant bullying at school. However, as much as he is very consciously portraying himself in a certain way—passing himself off as “harmless” when he is, in fact, tremendously powerful—Jamie also willingly presents himself as queer in order to provoke a response. He can always be read as gay: when in a pub in Salisbury, several men corner Jamie menacingly because of his earring (*Lexicon* 152). Jamie knowingly dresses and acts in a certain way because it simultaneously helps him hide but, importantly, because he is not afraid to be read as gay. In Jamie’s case, he intends for his sexuality to be obvious: he wants for others to know he is gay (to be read as who he is); he also wants to be read as harmless (a performance). Nick notes later that “he thought about the timid air Jamie always wore,

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<sup>34</sup> Judith Butler notes that this is a risk of parody in *Gender Trouble*. Those performances which begin as subversion can become “deadening cliches through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where ‘subversion’ carries market value” (xxiii). The repetition or ritualization of a parody can transform that parody into a reinforcement of hegemony.

deliberately receding into the background, purposely camouflaged” (*Lexicon* 257), but this “receding into the background” is only on one count. The levels to Jamie’s performance are multiple and complex.

It is Jamie’s performance, readers later learn, that gets under love interest Seb’s skin. Though Jamie claims that “I usually look like what I really am” (*Lexicon* 75), that is something of a lie. Seb explains to Mae precisely why he finds Jamie infuriating:

“It’s just—I remember things like learning to fight with a broken arm, learning to keep my head down, and I see Crawford walking around as if life is easy, running his mouth off at every opportunity and I get furious. And I always—I get the feeling that he acts like that because he has some secret he’s able to hide from everyone; that when he makes all his jokes and acts helpless, he’s laughing up his sleeve at us.” (*Covenant* 36)

Seb, as a magician and as a gay teen, has had to learn to hide himself twice over. He carefully cloaks himself, even after he has been accepted into a magician’s circle. However, Jamie can see right through his guise, at least when it comes to his magical abilities: “[W]hen I was fourteen Seb came to our school, and I knew. We can sense magic off each other, because magic to us is like air, it’s like meeting someone who breathes air when everyone else around you breathes water” (*Covenant* 332). The performance Jamie cannot see through is Seb’s heterosexual performance; unlike Jamie, Seb can pass as heterosexual, and the contrast between the two of them is the root of Seb’s anger. Brennan, then, highlights performance in both of her gay characters. In addition to presenting Jamie in a way that seems to conform to certain stereotypes, and

doing that to highlight the very scriptedness of that discursive construction,<sup>35</sup> Brennan effectively *queers* her text. In the category of scriptedness, then, Brennan succeeds in engaging with discursive structures and, thus, she broadens an understanding of LGBTQ characters.

Beyond the very explicit exploration of performance in the *Demons* trilogy, Brennan also tackles larger social scripts about queer youth and femininity. By marking Jamie as unabashedly effeminate through his fashion choices and his slim build, Brennan taps into the discourse surrounding what some critics term “sissy boys” (McInnes and Davies 105). The place of effeminate boys, even within the LGBTQ community, has always been fraught. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes:

Indeed, the gay movement has never been quick to attend to issues concerning effeminate boys. There is a discreditable reason for this in the marginal or stigmatized position to which even adult men who are effeminate have often been relegated in the movement. A more understandable reason than effeminophobia, however, is the conceptual need of the gay movement to interrupt a long tradition of viewing gender and sexuality as continuous and collapsible categories—a tradition of assuming that anyone, male or female, who desires a man must by definition be feminine and that anyone, male or female, who desires a woman must by the same token be masculine. (“Bring Up” 141)

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<sup>35</sup> Fan reaction would, as aforementioned, indicate that this tactic is not always successful. Similarly, Brennan attempts to trouble the trope of the highly sexualized and “exotic” dancer/woman of colour through the character of Sin Davies, but, again, parody creates a mixed bag of results and can end up reinforcing the scripts it tries to undermine.

Jamie is an abjected other, even within an imagined gay community. He is, as Sedgwick continues, the “haunting abject” (142). But this abjection can be a point of power. By choosing to make Jamie effeminate, and by choosing to tap into the discourses surrounding feminine gay teens, Brennan actively works to queer those same social scripts. Jamie may dress in lavender and wear an earring, but he is also tremendously powerful. David McInnes and Cristyn Davies note that the “experience of ‘sissy boys’ is potentially queer/ing” (105). The queering power of the effeminate boy rests precisely in his deviation from normative gender performances and, in Jamie’s case, that his femininity can be queering is certainly true. Brennan utilizes the abjected, feminine, gay boy to trouble that same script by coupling his femininity with tremendous power. Because his character actively parodies dominant gender performances, Jamie functions effectively as a means through which the hidden social scripts about gender and sexuality, and how they intersect, can be parodied, illuminated, and shifted.

While there are not any LGBTQ characters in the novels aside from Seb and Jamie,<sup>36</sup> the *Demons* trilogy succeeds in several different ways in its contextualization of queerness. First, and most importantly, is Jamie’s relationship with his sister Mae: in *Lexicon*, it is Mae who seeks out Nick and Alan to get her brother help; later in the same book, she kills a magician so she can clear Jamie’s mark (298-299). When reflecting on her choices in *Covenant*, Mae thinks, “She would have killed the whole Aventurine Circle if she’d had the power, and never cared how many dark, bloody dreams she’d have later. He was worth it all: worth more” (96). Jamie is tremendously loved: throughout all

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<sup>36</sup> Whether or not Gerald (Jamie’s crush in *Covenant* and leader of the Obsidian Circle after Black Arthur’s death) is queer remains a mystery. Readers do know that Jamie used to kiss a boy who appears briefly in *Covenant* after school, but he is such a minor character—barely more than a name—that he cannot be counted in any meaningful way.

of the novels, Mae bestows small acts of affection on her brother. She ruffles his hair and kisses his cheek; she keeps a careful eye on him, only wanting to ensure Jamie's wellbeing. She even buys them matching purple shirts that proclaim "LOCK UP YOUR SONS" (*Covenant* 219). By wearing them together, she loudly announces herself as part of Jamie's emotional family, all blood ties aside:

Jamie was clearly determined to be defiant in purple.

"Hang on a second," said Mae, and she dashed upstairs and changed out of her black HEATHCLIFF HAD IT COMING shirt and into a matching purple LOCK UP YOUR SONS shirt.

Unlike Jamie, Mae wore hers quite often.

Today it was a uniform, something that said *I am on the same side as you and willing to fight with you*. Jamie smiled, crooked and pleased, when he saw it, and Mae knew her sartorial peace offering had been accepted. (*Covenant* 219-220)

Mae stands with Jamie, actively going out of her way to be on his side. Similarly, Nick befriends Jamie, bluntly asking, "Hey, Jamie. Want to be friends?" (*Covenant* 30). To understand the importance of this exchange, it is crucial to remember that Nick is a demon with little use for relationships and no comprehension of empathy or friendship. However, he actively befriends Jamie, defends him throughout *Covenant*, and allows himself to be completely under Jamie's control in *Surrender*. Nick is never threatened by Jamie's sexuality. Jamie is thus surrounded by people who, though they are not a queer community, love, trust, and support him. He is a far cry from the lonely gay teenager

represented in many older YA texts, or even in Cassandra Clare's *The Mortal Instruments*.

Additionally, though there are not many gay characters in the novels, Brennan does include hints at homoerotic tensions running between Mae and Sin. However, the end to this homoeroticism is uncertain: Brennan may be proliferating the depiction of queer desire, but the tension between Mae and Sin, never subject to scrutiny by either girl, may seem to further marginalize that same desire. Mae, travelling to the Market, dances with Sin to call up a demon, noting with some shock that she can partner with Sin as she “thought it had to be a girl and a guy” (*Covenant* 141). Earlier, Mae is transfixed by Sin's beauty, noticing her “dark hair [that] streamed out with her silver ribbons,” “red lips curving back from her white teeth,” and a “brilliant” smile so stunning that Mae assumes it is for someone else when it is aimed at her (*Covenant* 139). The encounter leaves Mae “breathless” and Mae thinks, dazed, that “Sin's attention was like a spotlight. She smiled, and the whole world became brighter and more intense, seemed to hold the possibility of becoming another world entirely” (*Covenant* 139). When Mae danced previously, she danced with Nick and made sexual advances afterwards.<sup>37</sup> The sexual possibility hangs in the narrative space between Sin and Mae, to the point that, when Liannan, a female-bodied demon they call up, asks for a kiss, Mae assumes it will be from her and volunteers (*Covenant* 151). Thus, while Mae is primarily straight, queer desire still runs through the text. That being said, the fact that neither Mae nor Sin ever explores the implications of the coded attraction to each other could be troubling, and the ends to which the tension between Mae and Sin works is unclear—they, at once,

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<sup>37</sup> This was partially due to the effects of feverfruit, a fruit with effects like ecstasy that dancers take to heighten their emotions and thus more effectively call up demons.

demonstrate that apparent heterosexuality can be shot through with queer desire, thus broadening the portrayal of queer experiences, and do not name what passes between them. Both Sin and Mae, functionally heterosexual, can experience queer desire; furthermore, the interplay between the two indicates a level of comfort with queerness that, while not discussed, suggests a more positive and complex social understanding of sexuality. Thus, though this encounter may not be examined in any great detail by either Mae or Sin, that their homoeroticism can remain unspoken suggests that queer desire does not always need to be articulated (as is evident in the proliferation of coming out stories) and that queerness can be experienced in multivalence ways.

The representation of sex and/or lust is one of the aspects that is lacking in the *Demons* trilogy. While Brennan includes a few allusions to Jamie's same-sex attraction and her books contain a gay kiss, the way in which these moments are constructed works to obfuscate queer desire and, certainly, Jamie's sexuality receives far less attention than Nick's, Sin's, Alan's, or Mae's. In the first account, Jamie receives his mark from an incubus. He explains to Nick and Alan:

“It all started with—these dreams. I thought they were just dreams, strange dreams, of someone beautiful outside my window, asking to be let in.’ ...

Jamie looked up from the floor and found something in Alan's eyes that made him square his shoulders and say, in a steadier voice, “I let him in. And then, in the morning, it was real. I mean, someone had really been there.” (*Lexicon* 23)

While it is an allusion to Jamie's dreamed sexual encounter with a demon, this passage, which occurs very near the beginning of the first book, does not erase Jamie's sexual



desires.<sup>38</sup> However, Jamie can barely articulate his experience: there were “these” dreams, dreams that were “strange.” This is the extent to which Jamie can voice his sexual experience, and it is incredibly vague. However, when Nick jokes about his shirtlessness being a distraction, Jamie first scoffs at the idea, saying, “That whole tall, dark, and whatever thing isn’t even my style. He couldn’t distract me if he tried,” although he later amends that he has perhaps been distracted “for a minute or two” (*Covenant* 276). Again, this exchange is not significant, but Jamie nevertheless expresses sexual attraction to his best friend, and Nick is not threatened in the slightest. This scene cannot be said to constitute a positive depiction of Jamie’s sexual feelings, however, as Jamie admits only to distraction and later dismisses any of Mae’s suspicions that he may have a crush on Nick (*Covenant* 225). In the same book, Seb kisses Jamie. Although Brennan admits that she had to fight to keep the scene in the book (“Default”), the scene is brief and, like in *The Mortal Instruments*, happens at a distance.

When Seb reached out it looked like the gesture of a drowning man too, his fingers locking around the back of Jamie’s neck. Seb pulled Jamie’s head down and kissed him on the mouth.

Mae started to think that she should maybe go inside.

Jamie jumped back as if Seb’s mouth had conveyed an electrical charge.

“Um,” he said. “Huh?” (*Covenant* 364)

Again, the scene cannot be said to be erotic; Seb is terrified and crying, Jamie confused, while Mae observes the interaction. After the kiss, Seb spills all his dark secrets out, and

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<sup>38</sup> That the dreams are the cause of his demon marks is something I will explore later.

Jamie is disgusted, exclaiming, “Don’t you ever come near me again” (365). Jamie has no time for Seb, who has been unnecessarily cruel to him in an attempt to deal with Seb’s own sexuality, and, indeed, Seb was previously dating Mae. Thus, Jamie—and his sexuality—does not receive the same narrative attention or detail as Nick, Mae, or Sin do. The series therefore leaves queerness at arm’s length. Queer sexuality, when portrayed at all, seems remote and inaccessible.

Finally, in terms of importance, Jamie is foundational to motivating the action of all three novels. Christine Jenkins and Michael Cart note that, ideally, a queer character will not only avoid the pitfalls of negative portrayals but will be important to the plot (84), and I agree. Gay characters ought not be included simply for the sake of diversity, just as characters of colour or disabled characters should not be token inclusions; indeed, Brennan represents important and complex characters who are queer, as well as characters of colour and disabled characters, with attention to their specific and “lived” experiences. In *Lexicon*, it is Jamie’s mark that motivates the plot of the novel. Without the initial encounter between Jamie and Mae and the Ryves brothers, the plot could not have unfolded. The second novel focuses on the various magician circles that are pursuing Jamie, and Mae’s concern for her brother propels nearly all of her actions. Finally, though Jamie does not receive much narrative space in *Surrender*, the reader learns at the end of the novel that he has been carefully orchestrating events behind the scenes, ensuring his friends’ safety. Jamie cannot be considered a minor character and, crucially, his queerness is not his defining characteristic. Jamie’s importance to all three books, even when his actions take place off the page, commends Brennan’s novels.

The *Demons* trilogy succeeds in engaging with social scripts about gay teenagers and undermining the ideologies put forth by ideas such as the frail and the lonely gay teen. Jamie is surrounded by others who care deeply about him, and his power is unparalleled by any of the other characters, except perhaps Nick, who later grants complete control of his own power to Jamie (*Surrender* 342). However, Jamie's sexuality does not receive much narrative attention and is repeatedly distanced: he first cannot give voice to his desire; the sole same-sex kiss in the series occurs at a narrative distance and is observed through Mae's eyes, and it is not in any way an erotic moment. Despite the failure in that category, Jamie is an important, complex character who is not simply included for diversity's sake. Certainly in three of the four categories, then, the *Demons* trilogy proves itself to be a complex and compelling response to the discursive construction of queer teen sexuality.

## **ii. A Third Tier Mark: Contagion and Heteronormativity**

While she works to highlight performance and undermine prevalent social scripts about gender and sexuality, Brennan still uses all three of the trends I have previously noted: Jamie is cursed, parallels are drawn between a magical coming out and a queer coming out, and Nick cracks jokes about being gay. Turning a critical eye to these trends should not appear as a condemnation of the series—indeed, Jamie resists the connection between his magical abilities and his queerness—but rather ought to show how YA can still improve.

Admittedly an occupational hazard in any urban fantasy, poisoning and curses emerge in all three series and are often linked to queer sexuality. In the *Demons* trilogy,

Jamie is marked by an incubus he lets into his room. The tattoo-like mark on his hip, a third tier mark, spells danger and death, as Nick is quick to point out:

“The first tier is the two slashes. They form the doorway. Once it’s made, the demons are aware there’s a weak spot ... They can track you once that first mark is made. Second tier is the triangle. Three equilateral points ... and once they’re made it means that someone has to die ... Inside the door, inside the triangle, is the eye. That’s the third tier. Once you have that, they have a fix on you. Eventually they will be able to break down the barriers to your mind, crawl inside you, and control everything you do.” (*Lexicon* 29-30)

Jamie’s mark inscribes him with vulnerability. Additionally, his mark is contagious: after Nick’s speech, the house fills with demonic mist and Alan receives a first tier mark when a demon attacks (32). Later, Jamie’s third tier mark is transferred to Alan, leaving both of them with second tier marks—marks that require death to be wiped clean (*Lexicon* 29). While Jamie is not necessarily at fault for becoming marked, nor is he responsible for Alan’s altruistic act, the fact remains that Jamie is the instigator of a demonic contagion. Furthermore, the structure of the first book is entirely predicated upon Jamie’s demon mark: it is the gateway through which he can enter the magical world, which, although he has always been a part of it to an extent, remains a different realm. Jamie’s curse mark is born out of queer lust: to reiterate, he explains that “It all started with—these dreams. I thought they were just dreams, strange dreams, of someone beautiful outside my window, asking to be let in... I let him in. And then, in the morning, it was real” (*Lexicon* 23). Thus, Jamie’s queer desire at once grants him access to the world of which he is meant to

be a part, and infects those around him and necessitates death. The tension is clear: queerness is simultaneously death and a new life. I hesitate to draw this connection too firmly, however. Demons are equal opportunity villains and it is not necessarily Jamie's queerness that is to blame for his mark: in *The Demon's Covenant*, Mae lets a demon who has taken the form of Nick into her bedroom, behaving in a way that is almost identical to her brother's actions. While lust may then be the real culprit, the ideological implications of the narrative structure of *Lexicon* still tap into the cultural framework linking queerness with illness and death (Butler, *Bodies* 64).

Jamie poses an interesting twist on the coming out trope because, while he draws connections between being a magician and being gay, it is his magical abilities that cause him grief, not his sexuality. Early in *Covenant*, Gerald, a magician pursuing Jamie, notes that "It's not a choice ... You were born a magician. It's in your blood, and you think you can just stay here in this dull little life, being persecuted by dull little people, when you could be so much more" (*Covenant* 10). The parallels to certain discourses surrounding queerness are clear: one is born, in this case, with magical abilities; a community beckons and offers a new type of family, free of persecution by the non-magical majority. Mae, who loves Jamie dearly, expresses frustration that he did not tell her he was a magician because he told her "right away when [he] figured out [he was] gay" (*Covenant* 331). But Jamie resists the parallel and, indeed, provides a valuable insight into why linking coming out as supernatural ought not to be connected too strongly with coming out as queer:

"It's not the same!" Jamie almost shouted. "Being gay doesn't hurt anybody. This does!" He took a deep breath as she stared at him, then

swallowed and went on shakily. “I remember how scared I was you’d find out about me. I’d do something and I’d just freeze. I was so terrified. I thought there was nobody but me in all the world who could do magic ... Gerald said that if normal people found out, they’d hate us.” (*Covenant* 332)

Jamie’s magical abilities mark him as an outsider, not just from heterosexual society, but from the vast majority of humanity. His mother acknowledges that she has accepted his queerness (*Covenant* 388), but struggles to accept his magical abilities, while Mae works actively to protect and show solidarity with Jamie. Importantly, Jamie is both magical and gay, unlike either Kaye in *Modern Faerie Tales* or Simon in *The Mortal Instruments*, and he is clear that it is magic that marks him as other, not his sexuality. While his magical abilities make Jamie dangerous, he does not want to permit Mae to make the connection because his sexuality has hurt no one. Although queerness is often figured as a point of pain or familial shame, Jamie refuses to allow his sexuality to be allied with the very real danger his magical abilities present, and this resistance is foundational to how Brennan works against this specific trope.

Finally, one of the failures in the *Demons* trilogy is coupled with what I think of as one of its successes. Jamie’s friendship with Nick is compelling, as Nick is a demon who is attracted to women living in a man’s body; he has little time or patience for human emotions or empathy. However, he and Jamie strike up a meaningful friendship and develop close bonds of trust. While seeing a friendship between boys of different sexual orientations is excellent, and Nick appears completely unbothered by Jamie’s sexuality, that same bond lends itself to cracking jokes about being gay. Though Nick and

Jamie begin to spend a great deal of time together in *Covenant*, to the point that a jealous Seb suggests that Jamie is Nick's "new boyfriend" (*Covenant* 350), Nick sees the notion that he and Jamie are a couple as laughable. At Seb's jealous accusation, he loses "a low, genuinely amused laugh" and quips that Seb is "[i]mpugning [his] masculinity" (*Covenant* 350). While Nick's point about his masculinity being threatened by Seb's suggestion that he is queer—though he is not, in actuality, worried—links back into heteronormative anxieties about queerness (McInnes and Davies 107), that he finds the notion so ridiculous is interesting. Nick cannot be described as homophobic, precisely: he is not threatened by Jamie's wary appreciation of his body and, later, he allows Jamie keep him kneeling at his side to win the trust of the Aventurine Circle (*Surrender* 194-195). The situation is highly sexualized, but Nick remains fundamentally heterosexual. Although demons are not necessarily gendered, Nick is both gendered (he is very male) and sexualized (he is very heterosexual). The tacit assumptions of his heterosexuality functions to marginalize queer sexuality and to create a heteronormalizing narrative.

### **iii. Conclusion**

Brennan's series complicates and expands upon the representation of queerness in young adult literature. In terms of the four categories I laid out for a queer discursive analysis, the trilogy succeeds in presenting an important gay character who actively engages with several layers of performance. However, in the distanced portrayal of queer desire, the novels fail. Brennan may resist the parallels that both Black and Clare draw between a supernatural coming out and coming out as queer, but she does tap into the discourse surrounding queer infection. Furthermore, while the friendship between Nick

and Jamie is compelling in its own right, that it gives birth to a casual heteronormativity is troubling. Brennan actively works to parody social scripts that construct queer sexuality, and her series ultimately arises from, taps into, and occasionally attempts to undermine social discourses that reaffirm heteronormativity.



**Chapter V: “Mom, you know that forbidden love that Spock has for Kirk? Well, me too”: Holly Black’s *Modern Faerie Tales* and Queer Recuperation**

Holly Black is well known for *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, a middle-grade series she co-authored with Tony DiTerlizzi. *Modern Faerie Tales* is her first independently written series. Comprised of three books—*Tithe*, *Valiant*, and *Ironside*—*Modern Faerie Tales* tells interconnected stories about the unfolding war between the Seelie and Unseelie Faerie courts. In addition to featuring strong female protagonists and subtly portraying youth struggling for differentiated identities in a sea of complex social relations, made all the more complex by the faerie world that intersects with contemporary New York, *Modern Faerie Tales* features an innovative portrayal of queer youth. Cornelius Stone, a gay geek, becomes protagonist Kaye’s best friend and confidante in *Tithe* and continues as a major figure in *Ironside*. Corny is an atypical portrayal of a queer teen in many ways: he is lower-class, antagonistic, and not conventionally attractive. Furthermore, Black portrays his queer desire without elision: Corny’s sexual feelings are expounded upon and explored. While the first book appears to mirror the narrative of self-destruction, Black actively works with that social script to undermine its message by having Corny fight to become a self-determining social agent. Instead of a journey toward self-annihilation, Corny moves in the direction of agency and as much control over the unruly faerie world as he can gain without selling his independence, while he simultaneously learns to temper his antagonistic relationship with the world and form a genuine and empowering relationship with Luis. The trends of queer curses and a supernatural parallel to coming out do emerge in the series, but each is paired with a mitigating factor: Corny’s curse is cured through same-sex affection, and Corny’s own coming out, though not supernatural, is humorous, poignant, and culturally

relevant. Thus, Black actively works against dominant social scripts, and although she does tap into the dominant ideological trends of poisonings and supernatural coming outs, her use of those trends is complex and nuanced.

### **i. Shonen Ai and a Mullet: Queer Desire and Antagonism**

Corny is compellingly characterized: in addition to diverging from the social scripts about what queerness looks like, he experiences lust, has a complete and complex narrative arc, and grows throughout the series into a mature, insightful individual who refuses to be rendered powerless. The series thus succeeds most laudably in terms of scriptedness, not necessarily through parody, but primarily by creating a character who diverges so radically from social scripts. A computer geek with a mullet in *Tithe*, Corny describes himself as “Beaky. Skinny and tall with bad hair and worse skin” (19). He is good with computers, antagonistic, and he gets things done. Corny’s coming out is similarly fresh and is one of the few coming out scenes that manages to be both humorous and meaningful. Kaye, flipping through Corny’s comic collection, stumbles across *shonen ai*, Japanese comics that depict gay romance and sex. The description is frank: “She flipped a little further. Hero naked and lashed in the bad guy’s bed. She stopped flipping and stared at the picture. The blond’s head was thrown back in either ecstasy or terror as the villain licked one of his nipples” (*Tithe* 67). While Corny then tells her that there’s a “technical term” for him—“Faggot”—he later amends his nervous and antagonistic description with his wry coming out tale (67):

“Does Janet know?” [Kaye] couldn’t understand why he would tell *her* if Janet didn’t know, but certainly Janet would have said something. ...

“Yeah, the whole family knows. It’s no big deal. One night at dinner I said, ‘Mom, you know the forbidden love that Spock has for Kirk? Well, me too.’ It was easier for her to understand that way.” He sounded like he was daring Kaye to say something.

“I hope you aren’t expecting some kind of reaction,” Kaye said finally. “Because the only thing I can think of is that is the weirdest coming-out story I have ever heard.” (*Tithe* 67-68)

Corny dares the world to hate him. As Kaye wryly quips, only people who hate the world would give themselves mullets (*Ironside* 63). Corny at once identifies with a pejorative he may expect to be hurled at him, while simultaneously self-identifying as queer through cultural products. This is a mode of identification often employed by contemporary queer teens (Lipton 163).

However, while Corny is something of a loner, his feelings about the world—his cynicism and antagonistic anger—have little to do with his sexuality and much more to do with his class position: Corny is a boy raised in a trailer park, working for next to no money at a small town gas station. This social isolation is the source of his sense of not belonging, although it does allude to the cultural myth of isolation noted by George Chauncey (2). When Luis comes to his home for the first time, Corny feels immensely uncomfortable:

The lawn in front of Corny’s trailer was decorated with a giant inflated penguin wearing a green scarf and hat and a red Star Trek shirt... It sat on the lawn, glowing erratically. As Luis pulled into the gravel drive,

multicolored lights strobed from the roof of the trailer next door, turning the whole lot into a disco.

“Aren’t you going to tell me what a beautiful home I have?” Corny said, but the joke felt forced, lame. (*Ironside* 243)

Corny worries about being judged because of his class position and his family, although Luis is a homeless teenager who squats in abandoned apartments. Corny suddenly notices “the water stains on the ceiling of his bedroom” (*Ironside* 251-252) and is embarrassed to have Luis, a boy he has feelings for, see his home. Unlike Cassandra Clare’s Alec Lightwood, whose angst derives solely from his sexuality, Corny is much more complex. Being gay has caused him no social stress that is detectable in the novel, although his self-identification with the pejorative “faggot” indicates that he is fully aware of the cultural prejudice against LGBTQ persons. However, his family is unfazed, and while he is wary about coming out to Kaye, she is entirely unbothered and eventually becomes his best friend. Later, as Corny is drawn further into the faerie world, it becomes evident that sexual orientation is of no consequence to faeries. It is Corny’s otherness as manifested in different ways—his class, his appearance, his geekiness—that makes him an outsider. Furthermore, that his coming out is told as a humorous but still poignant and meaningful story, and that Corny’s muffled anxiety is clear, are both important: while his coming out is not typical, Corny’s emotions reveal the very real tension that many queer teens experience when naming themselves as queer. Thus, in terms of performance, *Black* succeeds in portraying an LGBTQ teen who is not at all like predominant social scripts, but whose emotional complexity creates a real portrait with which teens can relate.

However, in the category of context, Corny is the only queer character, aside from Nephamael, in *Tithe*. Although it is revealed in *Valiant* that Val's best friend Ruth is gay and readers later learn that Luis, who appears in both *Valiant* and as a love interest in *Ironside*, is also queer, Corny is initially very much on his own. This isolation may be another source of his antagonism: Corny, though he is surrounded by an accepting family and buttresses himself with queer cultural products, is isolated. There is no queer community in which he can participate; until he meets Luis, there are apparently no other gay teens with whom he can spend time. Even then, however, Corny tracks down Luis because Luis has the second sight: he comes to Luis because he wants to find a way to protect himself against faeries, not because he seeks a queer community. All that being said, it is fitting that Corny is an isolated outsider: in Black's novels, isolation is a recurring theme. Holding on to people and making connections that can withstand the trickery of faerie magic are repeatedly shown to be difficult, and potentially impossible, tasks. This theme recurs in Black's short story "The Land of Heart's Desire," which follows the characters of *Modern Faerie Tales* after the events of *Ironside*. In the short story, Roiben notes that "it is as easy to hate what you love as to hate what you fear" (188). Corny and Roiben agree, in their own ways, that each of them is afraid that he will cease to be adequate for his partner (189-192). Importantly, Black draws parallels between Kaye and Roiben's relationship and their relationship problems and Corny's relationship with Luis. Corny does not have a hard time connecting with Luis because he is queer; rather, all relationships are poised on the brink of destruction, and it is the fight for love that matters—and it *is* a fight. Family, community, and relationships are frail for every character in the series. While Black's portrayal of Corny's isolation from other

LGBTQ characters reinforces the myth of isolation, within the series as a whole, it fits as a part of the cohesive narrative and thematic fabric. Still, that Corny has no queer community remains troubling: living in the shadow of a purportedly realist vision of New York, there can be no narrative reason as to why he would remain so utterly isolated.

Corny's prevalence in both *Tithe* and *Ironsides* commends Black's series in the category of importance. He is both important to the plot at large, and also has his own complex and interesting sub-plot told almost entirely through his point-of-view. Although Kaye and Janet are initially best friends in *Tithe*, it is Corny who helps Kaye deal with faerie politics and plotting; he learns her secret—that she is a pixie—first. Nephamael is not defeated by Kaye or Roiben, his faerie knight counterpart, though Kaye poisons him with iron shavings. Instead, Corny takes him down in a clear-eyed moment of fury at having been treated like a toy:

He had crept forward to where Nephamael's body had writhed. A lock of hair had fallen across his face. There was a bruise on his cheek the color of his grape-stained mouth. ...

As though he could feel the heat of her stare, Corny looked up. His eyes were anguished.

"Corny," Kaye said, taking a half step forward.

Still looking at her, Corny picked up the golden knife Roiben had dropped. The beginnings of a smirk were on his lips as he lifted it.

"No!" Kaye screamed, running toward Corny, frantic to stop him from stabbing himself.

The blade plunged into Nephamael's chest. Again and again, Corny stuck the body of the faerie knight, the knife making a sickeningly liquid sound with each thrust. Blood soaked Corny's pants. A keening sound came from deep in his throat. (*Tithe* 324)

Corny, who has dealt with extreme abuse at the hands of the faerie, appears to have an unhealthy masochistic desire for self-destruction. Kaye is initially worried that he will kill himself in the faerie court because of the agony he feels about being used so foully. Instead, Corny only wants Nephamael dead. The violence he commits against Nephamael's body is a sexualized violence of repeated penetration and blood that leaves Corny's pants "[b]lood-soaked." Though he has been dazed by faerie magic and lust, Corny refuses to be kept as a pet. In *Ironside*, Corny scours the library and captures a faerie in an attempt to gain agency. This is why he seeks out Luis, who has "True Sight" and can "see through glamours" (*Ironside* 45). It is Corny's drive for power that leads to his curse—that anything he touches will wither—after he blasts a Seelie court knight with a face full of bug poison (*Ironside* 83). He later kills the same knight with the very curse that was bestowed upon him. Corny refuses to borrow power even when it is offered, because "if he wanted vengeance, he'd get it on his own" (*Ironside* 278). As he helps Kaye save Roiben and resolve the Seelie queen's plots, Corny remains focused on his own independence, on his own ability to gain footing in the slippery faerie world. Thus, while Kaye drives the plot, Corny's assistance is vital and his journey is one of gaining agency in a world that actively works to take it away. He has his own complete narrative arc that is not predicated solely on his queerness.

It is in the depiction of queer desire that Black's novels shine most brightly. Even when Corny first comes out to Kaye, it is through nearly pornographic comics. Corny is never desexualized, instead feeling intense sexual desire that the narrative does not merely allude to from a distance. The narration is often focalized through Corny, and his lust is directly portrayed. Thinking back on Nephamael after an initial encounter, Corny feels "a longing so intense it made him sick" (*Tithe* 164). When Kaye notices the scratches made by Nephamael's cloak of thorns, Corny admits that the knight hurt him "No more than I wanted him to" (*Tithe* 172). While these same desires prove dangerous—Nephamael sweeps Corny up in a haze of dangerous lust—Corny's queerness is later contextualized as healthy and normal,<sup>39</sup> particularly through the parallels Black draws between heroine Kaye's relationship with Roiben and Corny's relationship with Luis. It is not that Corny's sexual desires are the source of his pain: though lust is the weapon faeries like to use, as readers discover in *Ironside*, he feels the same attraction to Luis and that attraction is a positive thing. Luis kisses Corny to break a faerie spell and the description matches any of the heterosexual kisses in the series:

Luis kissed him. Luis, who could do everything that he couldn't, who was smart and sarcastic and the last boy in the world likely to want an awkward geek like Corny. It was dizzying to open his mouth against Luis's. Their tongues slid together for a devastating moment, then Luis pulled back. (*Ironside* 186)

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<sup>39</sup> This is not to suggest that Corny's apparent masochism is unhealthy, but rather that his queerness can be experienced in a way that does not threaten his personal autonomy or agency. Whether or not Corny is capable of actually giving consent when his partner is a faerie is a topic worth considering, and further complicates the sexual dynamics between Corny and Nephamael.



Kissing Luis is just as “dizzying” as kissing faeries, but his affection is a cure to the haze of faerie-induced lust instead of being allied with a loss of self. Ultimately, it is their closeness that lifts the curse from Corny: Luis’s brother is murdered by faeries; as Luis cries and moves toward Corny, the salt water of his tears strips the curse (*Ironside* 261). Though Luis’s intention is to embrace self-destruction over his brother’s body, the fact that he is drawn to Corny, his voice filled with “longing” as he admits that he “really did want you to touch me” (*Ironside* 260), their mutual attraction at once saves Luis from his destructive impulse and frees Corny from his curse. They are both made better through their feelings for each other.

In *Modern Faerie Tales*, Black creates a gay character who deviates from most of those social scripts surrounding queerness that I am analyzing. While Corny is isolated and angry, his feelings are largely about his class position and his powerlessness. He makes an exceptional friend in Kaye; while there is not a queer community of which he can be a part, the implications of that loneliness are slightly tempered by the fact that isolation is a recurring theme in the series, although that the series uses the myth of isolation cannot be overlooked. Corny is of great import to the series as a whole, and much of *Tithe* and *Ironside* are focalized through him. Furthermore, Black depicts Corny’s sexuality with frankness and detail, instead of shying away from his feelings of lust and desire. As a series, *Modern Faerie Tales* features a compelling and complex gay character who finds a solid relationship that is neither idealized—Roiben and Corny bond over their relationship trouble in “The Land of Heart’s Desire”—nor glossed over. Black’s depiction of queerness works to complicate contemporary understandings of

LGBTQ teens by providing Corny with a nuanced characterization and feelings that range from dark and destructive to empowering and purifying.

**ii. “Let everything you touch wither”: Glamours, Curses, and Queer Recuperation**

However, despite its many successes, *Modern Faerie Tales* does employ several of the previous trends I have outlined that indicate normative discursive constructs within YA: first, Corny is cursed by a faerie with a variation on King Midas’s touch, and the curse taps into the discursive construction of queerness as impure and sick; and, second, Kaye goes through her own coming out as she reveals to her mother that she is a pixie. However, Black deals with these tropes in a way that works to mitigate some of their most troubling aspects. Though Corny is cursed, and although there is a supernatural coming out, there are no jokes about gay desire, and Corny’s curse arises because he refuses to ask for help from Kaye when trying to gain agency. That same curse is lifted by queer affection. Thus, Black engages with social scripts about queerness but resists the ideologies at work in those trends. However, such a resistance can only have limited success when it employs the very tropes it struggles against.

In *Ironside*, Corny is cursed by a faerie knight sent to speak with Kaye. Unlike Alec and Jamie, Corny is not cursed because of queer desire. Instead, his curse is the result of his attempt to gain some semblance of control over the unruly faerie world, although he later quips that the faerie “was hitting on me ... I had to protect my virtue” (*Ironside* 100). Corny notices the faerie, Adair, watching Kaye “fixedly” at a club (80). He follows Adair into the bathroom, where the faerie tries to tempt Corny by appealing to his sexual desires:

A smooth, warm hand touched Corny's cheek, and Corny jumped. "I feel human," the faerie man said.

Without meaning to, Corny leaned into the touch. Desire flared in him, so sharp it was almost pain. But as his eyes drifted closed, he saw his sister's face disappearing under briny water ... He saw himself crawling through the dirt to bring a pulpy fruit to a drop at a laughing faerie knight's feet.

His eyes snapped open. He was so furious his hands shook. "Don't flirt," Corny said. (*Ironside* 81)

Though Corny is lost in a haze of lust in *Tithe* and that lust is nearly his undoing, he learns not to be manipulated in the same way. Thus, when he shoots Adair with Raid, it is to protect himself from being pulled into the faerie's influence. This act of aggression, however—Corny's drive for control—leads to his curse: "'I curse you.' The faery rolled onto his side and spat a reddish gob of spittle onto Corny's cheek. 'Let everything that your fingers touch wither'" (*Ironside* 86).<sup>40</sup> The variation on King Midas's touch appears linked to the cultural construction of queerness as destructive: Corny can no longer touch anything; he cannot express affection without risking decay and destruction. However, just as Alec is saved by same-sex love, Corny becomes whole again because of Luis; unlike Alec's recuperation, however, Corny's healing is cathartic and opens him up to a broader world of possibility. After Luis's brother is murdered by faeries, Corny feels the compulsion to "wrap his arms around Luis, comfort him, remind him he wasn't alone" (*Ironside* 260) and he reaches out to the other boy with his cursed hands. Corny wants

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<sup>40</sup> Black employs both "faerie" and "faery" as variations on the spelling, apparently without meaning. I have chosen the former to use throughout.

human connection, but is prevented by the curse that acts like a barrier between him and affection. Luis, however, sees the curse as an opportunity to end his suffering: he says, “Touch me. It doesn’t fucking matter now, does it? ... I want you to touch me” (*Ironside* 260). But Corny’s curse can be lifted by running salt water, and Luis’s tears of fear and desire and grief cleanse Corny. At the very moment Corny’s hand touches Luis face, Corny cries out, “Stop! I fucking care!” (*Ironside* 261). This moment of emotional intimacy, of Corny’s declaration of affection, works to free both of the boys from their own demons—Luis from his self-destructive grief and loneliness, and Corny from his curse and antagonism. Queer affection is recuperative in *Modern Faerie Tales* and it is the key that undoes Corny’s curse. However, even in the act of queer recuperation, and even though both Luis and Corny are ultimately saved through their mutual affection, that Corny is cursed remains normative in its use of the cultural connection between queerness and contagion.

In contrast to Corny’s unusual coming out is Kaye’s. Kaye, a heterosexual character, experiences her own “coming out” as a supernatural creature. Although Kaye is primarily motivated to tell her mother, Ellen, that she is a changeling because Ellen’s real daughter still lives in the Seelie court, she is also desperate for her mother to know who she really is. She explains that she’s “not human” and that Ellen’s “real daughter has been gone a long time. Since she was really little. Since we were both really little” (*Ironside* 106). Ellen does not believe Kaye at first, but then Kaye drops her glamour—the magical mask she puts on to appear human—and explains that “It’s me ... This is what I really look like” (*Ironside* 108). Ellen’s horror is a rejection of the very fundamentals of who Kaye is. Kaye wonders, darkly, as Ellen scrambles to put the pieces

together, if Ellen has always been “repulsed” by Kaye (*Ironside* 109). Much like a gay child might reveal who he or she is and feel rejected, Kaye is laced through with pain but also with a sweet sense of freedom: “It was a relief to finally know what she had to do. To finally admit she wasn’t human” (*Ironside* 110). For Kaye to admit she is a faerie, a truth she only learns about herself in *Tithe*, is to acknowledge the basics of who she is. It is to reveal the hidden side of herself, the self that is—much like gay children are assumed to be straight—blanketed away by assumptions of her humanity. But, as Jamie points out in *The Demon’s Covenant* (332), there is a substantial difference between being gay and being a magical creature known for cruelty, aside from fictiveness. Kaye’s mother may be right to feel repulsed when she discovers her daughter is not actually her daughter, and that her real child has been stolen away by faeries. However, because the series features such an interesting gay coming out, the parallels are not drawn too firmly between Kaye-as-pixie and Corny-as-queer-teen. Black works to distinguish between the danger of magic and queerness. However, that she still employs a supernatural coming out is interesting: each of the three series I have examined utilizes a similar technique, indicating that there is a fundamental connection—however much Black or Sarah Rees Brennan wishes to work against it—between revealing the magical truth of one’s self, even if that truth is dangerous, and confessing one’s sexuality.

### **iii. Conclusion**

*Modern Faerie Tales* compellingly grapples with sexuality, isolation, and identity throughout the series. Black adeptly crafts Corny, a character who wildly deviates from the cultural construction of queerness: Corny is lower-class, unattractive, and angry at the

world. While certain echoes of previous tropes sound throughout the series—Corny is cursed and he is isolated—the way in which the series then deals with these same issues attempts to shift their meanings, although echoes of the implicit ideologies cannot be expunged. Corny is healed through queer affection; lust becomes, instead of a weapon, a means of recuperating agency. Similarly, his journey is largely one of learning to be open to the world, to accept affection without antagonistic sarcasm or fear. While Kaye’s coming out creates troubling parallels between faeries and queerness, Corny’s own coming out is grounded in what real queer teens may experience and is simultaneously humorous and poignant. By engaging with the previous tropes surrounding LGBTQ teens, and by working to create a complex and fully-realized character who is so much more than his sexuality, Black succeeds in shifting the representation of queerness in YA.

## Chapter VI: Conclusion

As a genre, YA is relatively young and, much like the protagonists at its center, it still has some growing to do. As one of the most popular genres of literature (Grady), however, and as novels that reach both youth and adults alike, YA has tremendous reach and the ability to cultivate new ways of interpreting the world, or to reiterate old ones. Today's LGBTQ youth are now able to turn to contemporary cultural products and, instead of searching out subtext or writing fanfiction to queer the canon, they can find queer teens represented on the page; how those representations play out, and the power those characterizations have, is a relatively recent field of inquiry. Given YA's popularity, its broad audience, and its commercial success, it should come as no surprise that many cultural tensions are playing out within the genre's confines. One of those core tensions is how authors can represent queer sexuality within young adult literature.

The three urban fantasy series I have examined, in their own ways, simultaneously attempt to represent queerness in a non-normative way and then make use of tropes and constructions that are certainly normative. Because cultural products emerge from a web of social structures and relations, no text can be perfect. The way in which readers think about queerness is always changing, much like queer identities are always changing. Texts respond to the cultural discourses surrounding LGBTQ persons and either conform to previous modes of understanding queerness or work against those modes to open up the discourse and allow new and myriad identities and identifications. Sarah Rees Brennan's *Jamie Crawford* actively engages with the notion of performance and works, as an effeminate boy, to queer the social scripts around gender and sexuality. Holly Black's *Cornelius Stone* diverges in different ways, as an antagonistic and lower-

class character whose development is grounded in much more than his queerness. And, although Cassandra Clare's Alec Lightwood is defined almost entirely by his sexual orientation and the feelings of pain his queerness causes him, Clare still sees four queer characters into print and may yet offer Alec a hopeful ending. Gay YA has already begun the process of diversification—in terms of race, ability, gender, sexuality, story arc, and personality. There may still be room to grow, but the move toward more diverse and more numerous queer representation has already begun.

I originally set out to determine if YA as a whole is getting better in its representation of queer youth, and to determine where YA has to go. The way queerness is represented in my primary texts indicates changes in the way some YA texts approach queerness; those changes are often toward a more transgressive or a less normative portrayal of queer experiences. The authors I have discussed all work to represent queerness in a way that, at its very minimum, addresses some of the base concerns as outlined by Christine Jenkins and Michael Cart, who write:

What advances remain to be made? Well, for starters we clearly need more GLBTQ books featuring characters of color, more lesbian and bisexual characters, more transgender youth, and more characters with same-sex parents. The literature, in short, needs to be more all-inclusive ... And so GLBTQ literature needs to be—and is slowly becoming—more than coming-out stories. It needs to include more stories about young people whose homosexuality is simply a given and who are dealing with other issues and challenges—emotional, intellectual, physical, social, developmental, etc. that are part of teens' lives. (165-166)



While many of these new directions are being explored and remain in their infancy within YA, I would add that contemporary YA must cultivate a more comprehensive understanding of how it emerges from a cultural network of values and norms. Representation is not simply enough: it is not simply enough to represent diversity, to include more queer characters of colour or more disabled queer characters. It is not enough to simply give gay teens happy endings, although this, in and of itself, may help undermine the social script that spells doom and gloom for gay youth. The need to engage with the social scripts surrounding LGBTQ youth is something Brennan notes in her article on diversity, arguing that writers and readers alike ought to “[b]reak a role to pieces and ... examine [those pieces]” (“Stage”). Complex examination, she concludes, is crucial to engaging with the vast and nuanced social networks in which readers live and in which writers write:

These issues are really, really complicated. So are people. I don't think there are any simple answers—I think there are billions, because every person has to decide on their own, and sometimes people change their minds—and I don't think there should be. But to keep on thinking, keep on talking, keep on turning ideas like these over and over, on their heads, seen from all the angles—that's what I want to do as a writer, and what I tried to do with this series. I'm so glad I got to. (“Stage”)

Simple answers, or simple stories, can never be satisfactory. Each text has both transgressive and citational representations. But it is the interrogation of how each text functions, how each characters works with a role or against it, that is the interesting—and, I believe, the important—approach to take.

Young adult literature is malleable and shifting. Given its propensity toward change and social progressiveness, there is little doubt that the way YA represents queerness will continue to change, and that the ideologies it cultivates and taps into will also shift. With Black, Brennan, Clare and other new writers at its helm, YA is poised to become a powerful player in the realm of examining entrenched cultural ideologies, even if that examination comes in thinking about how a text works after it has been published. With critical eyes, readers of all ages can open a young adult novel and engage with the social scripts at work in each text and, hopefully, read queerness.

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