

# **"WEYRBRED IS BEST FOR GREENS": CONTAINMENT AND WORLD-BUILDING IN ANNE MCCAFFREY'S *DRAGONRIDERS OF PERN***

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The representation of sexuality in Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern* series (1967-2012; henceforth *Pern*) is complex and problematic.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I examine the representation of male homosexuality in *Pern*, which has been largely neglected in existing scholarship, in order both to draw attention to world-building gaps between what the text *says* and what the text *does* and, at the same time, to attend to elements of this representation that the text disavows. I argue that, while *Pern*'s treatment of homosexuality is undoubtedly homophobic, the fissures in its portrayal reveal the limits of its attempts to repress homosexuality in its world-building. I argue that, in fact, homosexuality is *central* to *Pern*'s world-building, such that any attempt to describe the dynamics of sexuality within the series is necessarily incomplete if it does not address the role of homosexuality in shaping the sexual and social dynamics of *Pern*'s world.

I am driven here by my desire to understand my own affective connection to the series as a gay reader despite the extent to which its world is structured to exclude me. My critical approach is guided by what Stefan Ekman and Audrey Isabel Taylor have called "critical world-building" (8). As Ekman and Taylor describe it, critical world-building entails a careful attention to "how an imaginary world is constructed (critically) as a dynamic interplay of building-blocks and their web of implications and relations" (8). My analysis focuses on the implications of the treatment of sexuality as one specific aspect of "the way in which world elements are presented" in *Pern* (Ekman and Taylor 11), bracketing the narrative, its explicit theoretical concerns, and aspects of world-building not directly related to sexuality.

Ultimately, I echo Alexis Lothian's observation that while "[f]ictional speculation often opens up alternative possibilities only to close them down into futures that are all too predictable to dominant logics," nonetheless "the failures of speculative fictions' radical possibilities do not invalidate their meaning, their interest, or their capacity to make a difference" (20). My reading of *Pern* extends this point even to works that were *not* written with the radicalism of queer or feminist futurisms and which in fact actively seek to limit or undercut radical possibilities. I am arguing that attending to the aspects of a text that it wants its readers *not* to think about and the places where its conservative and reactionary impulses are most explicitly evident can be a productive avenue of analysis and may reveal unexpected spaces of possibility. In this case, focusing on both incidental or implicit and explicit and substantial references to homosexuality serves to drive home the extent to

which it structures the world of *Pern*, while at the same time revealing the failures and limits of the series' heteronormativity and the ways *Pern* implies possibilities for (specific kinds of) queer life in spite of itself.

Within *Pern*, there is sharp division between the conservative sexual mores of 'Holds' and 'Crafts' and the more liberal mores of 'Weyrs,' the communities of the titular dragonriders. Weyrs are, ostensibly, sexually open, having "long since disregarded sexual inhibitions" (*Dragonquest* 20). Where homosexuality, in particular, is marginalised in Holds and Crafts, the sexual dynamics of dragons and their riders mean that sexualities and desires we would identify as 'queer' are not only accepted in the Weyrs but *expected*. I argue, however, that this division between dragonriders and others functions as a containment strategy for non-normative sexualities. At the same time, I argue that the failure of *Pern*'s attempts to fully contain the possibilities opened by Weyr sexuality tells us something about the ways in which speculative world-building, while shaped and limited by the context in which authors are writing, retains the potential to move beyond that context in unexpected ways – including ways authors might consciously reject. Ultimately, I argue that, despite – or perhaps because of – the fact that the series is obviously homophobic, queer readers may nonetheless find in *Pern* an unexpected freedom to manoeuvre: the lengths to which the series goes to position queerness as negative and to relegate it to the background serve instead to highlight the extent to which queerness and queer characters are unequivocally and explicitly present as an essential part of the textual world. This contested space of, to borrow a phrase from Hari Kunzru, "vertiginous and troubling possibilities" that *Pern* is forced to either confront or – more often – evade is where this essay dwells (147).

To explore the complexities of *Pern*'s representation of sexuality, I first outline *Pern*'s setting and consider its treatment of sexuality generally. I then undertake a close analysis of the representation of homosexuality particularly in *Dragonquest* (1971) and *Red Star Rising/Dragonseye* (1996/1997). I approach *Pern* in the same way that Sofia Samatar describes her relationship with the work of Tayeb Salih:

There's no point in asking a loved one, "Why do I love you?"  
The person is likely to feel uncomfortable, even attacked, as if  
the question conceals a criticism. Books, however, invite this  
question. You open them, reopen them, analyze every line. [...]   
unlike a loved one, these incessant questions won't translate to  
"I don't love you," but "I do, I do." And so the word "criticism"  
has two meanings. (24-25)

If, as Toril Moi suggests, literary criticism begins from the question "Why this?" and an attempt to "get clear on something" (193), then I am trying to answer two variations on this question: first, why is homosexuality represented in *Pern* in the ways that it is, and what do these representations do? Second, why do I as a queer reader love *Pern* so deeply, despite its many flaws?

### A Note on Terminology

Throughout this article, I regularly use the term 'homosexuality' and the adjective 'homosexual' when discussing characters and sexual practices in *Pern*, sometimes in addition to and sometimes in preference to 'queer'; I want to briefly elaborate on this choice. While the referent of 'queer' is (strategically) vague, encompassing a wide range of sexualities, genders, and sexual practices, this essay is concerned specifically with sexuality between men as the kind of queerness most readily visible within *Pern*. While I would welcome, for example, a trans reading of the series, to simply call the characters and sexual practices I examine 'queer' would be to imply a much broader intervention than my analysis actually makes. 'Queer' also implies that the sexualities, genders, and social practices it refers to are non-normative. While it is true that within our primary world sex between men remains *non-normative*, its status in *Pern* is more complex, as we will see. The use of 'homosexual(ity)' to pathologise people and sexual practices through scientific and medical discourses is also reflected both within the series itself – where "homosexual" is the only specific term for sexuality between men that appears (*Dragonseye* 70) – and in McCaffrey's own statements about sexuality within *Pern*. Some of these statements have become infamous because they reveal a deep homophobia that regarded homosexuality precisely as something pathological.<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, I sometimes use 'queer' in order to emphasise the non-normative aspect of sexualities and sexual practices *within* the world of *Pern* or when considering the ways in which readers might situate characters and sexual practices in relation to primary-world configurations of sexuality, but I also, in order to clearly bound my argument, use 'homosexual' as a logistical descriptor for sex or relationships between men (some of whom may be heterosexual or bisexual), and to describe men who primarily or exclusively engage in sex or relationships with other men.

### Sexuality in *Pern*

*Pern* covers a period of 2,500 years in the history of the human colony on the titular planet. *Pern* periodically experiences 'Threadfall,' the raining of a spore-like life-form known as 'Thread,' which consumes any organic matter it touches; the colonists combat Thread with fire-breathing 'dragons,' closely resembling mythological dragons, which permanently telepathically bond with (or 'Impress') their riders upon hatching. Over the centuries, Pernese society develops both feudal and corporatist elements. The majority of people live in 'Holds,' agricultural communities governed by a feudal 'Lord Holder,' while a smaller proportion belong to 'Crafts,' politically independent guilds providing specialist labour and art. My focus in this essay is on the several 'Weyrs,' communities organised around dragons.

There are five dragon colours, indicating gender and relative size: the largest are gold or 'queen' dragons, who are female and always Impress women; then bronzes, who are male and always Impress men; then browns, male with male riders; then blues, male with male riders; then greens, female with male or (rarely) female riders. Green dragons make up approximately half of the dragon population. Weyr society is organised according to an internal hierarchy: at the top are the 'Weyrwoman,' the rider of the senior queen dragon, and the 'Weyrleader,' the rider of the bronze

dragon who most recently mated with the senior queen; below them are other queens and bronzes, then browns, then blues, and finally greens.

Dragon mating is central to the social structure of Weyrs – “the dragonriders and everybody else concerned spend a lot of time thinking about sex and playing at it” (Monk 218) – and is also at the core of my argument. Dragons are represented as exclusively heterosexual, with sexual activity limited to a cycle of ‘mating flights’ initiated by female dragons. These flights involve an airborne chase, with a female dragon attempting to outfly her male pursuers. When the female dragon is caught, the mating dragons’ instincts overwhelm their riders through their telepathic bonds. The result is that the riders of mating dragons will themselves be compelled to have sex with each other, regardless of the degree of sexual attraction between them under normal circumstances and with, effectively, no possibility of refusal or revocation of consent: “when dragons rose in mating flight, the condition of your partner counted for nothing” (*Dragonflight* 153). New riders may find the experience overwhelming or violating: the bronze rider F’lar describes his first sexual encounter with the queen rider Lessa during a mating flight as “violent” and explicitly compares it to rape (*Dragonflight* 152). Mating flights also have a broader impact on a Weyr’s inhabitants:

A mating female dragon broadcast her emotions on a wide band. [...] Herdbeasts within range stampeded wildly and fowls, wherries and whers went into witless hysterics. Humans were susceptible, too, and innocent Hold youngsters often responded with embarrassing consequences. (*Dragonquest* 20)

For this reason, dragonriders have “long since disregarded sexual inhibitions” (*Dragonquest* 20), and this sexual freedom distinguishes life in Weyrs from life in Holds:

Weyrwomen can’t be bound by any commoner moralities. A Weyrwoman has to be subservient to her queen’s needs, including mating with many riders if her queen is flown by different dragons. Most craft and holdbred girls envy such freedom... (*Dragonquest* 168)

Young women who are brought to a Weyr for hatchings often stay on regardless of whether they Impress – in fact, “[g]irls beg to come to the Weyr” (*Dragonquest* 100). One candidate’s desire to stay is explicitly framed in terms of sexual freedom: “Kylara had found certain aspects of Weyr life exactly suited to her temperament. She had gone from one rider’s weyr to another’s. She had even seduced F’lar—not at all against his will, to be sure” (*Dragonflight* 154). Where Holds are sexually and socially conservative, oriented towards “hav[ing] enough children to extend their legitimate holdings or establish new ones,” Weyrs are open, creating space for sexualities and relationships that would be regarded as non-normative within Holds (*Red Star* 74).

Existing *Pern* scholarship on sexuality has focused on heterosexual relationships and gender politics. Patricia Monk situates Weyr sexuality in relation to the concept of marriage, suggesting that

"[f]or McCaffrey, the key to solving the problems of the gamos [i.e., the (heterosexual) married couple] is the shifting of the emotional commitment of the gamos to the pairbond" between dragon and rider (218). In her reading of F'lar and Lessa's relationship, Jane Donawerth notes that the violence with which it begins "indicates the alienation of their relationship," where sexual contact occurs only as a result of their bond with their dragons, and with no opportunity for Lessa, who "does not expect this outcome" to refuse the encounter (54). F'lar and Lessa ultimately develop a relationship of apparently mutual love and respect by virtue of Lessa's refusal to "become the victim that F'lar desires" (Donawerth 55), essentially forcing him to treat her as an equal. Robin Roberts suggests that ultimately F'lar and Lessa "show their fellow Pernese and the reader an alternative model of supportive heterosexual love" (48), but the inciting moment of violence nonetheless raises questions about the dynamics of heterosexual relationships in the series. Mary Brizzi highlights the element of "feminine supremacy" in the hierarchy of dragons but also the "markedly sexist" portrait of domestic life and gender relations (46, 45). She also identifies the sadistic-masochistic element of Kylara's sexual relationship with the Lord Holder Meron, who "demonstrates his manhood by leaving bruises on his sex partner" (48); a comment in *Dragonquest* that "men, conditioned to respond to Kylara's exotic tastes, would brutalize" a sexually inexperienced woman suggests that this reflects Kylara's desires as well (169).

Despite the Weyrs' ostensible openness to sexual promiscuity, *Pern*'s protagonists all settle into monogamous, heterosexual relationships – F'lar with Lessa, F'nor with Brekke, K'vin with Zulaya *et cetera* – and promiscuous dragonrider characters like Kylara are negatively portrayed. F'lar, for example – notwithstanding his own prior encounter with Kylara – is "immensely pleased" that Lessa "d[oes] not, indeed, dally with any man" other than himself (*Dragonquest* 23). In this respect, *Pern* reflects what Samuel Delany has called "the traditional liberal dilemma" where "[o]ur conservative forebears postulated symmetrical spaces of possible action for women and men and then declared an ethical prohibition on women's functioning in that space" such that even when a "liberal generation [...] wishes to move into the prohibited space, change the values, and repeal the punishments," the result is that "at the level of praxis the *conflict* is repressed, and with it all emblems of the existence of the space in which it takes place" ("To Read *The Dispossessed*" 119, original emphasis). The Weyr is described as a sexually open environment but this claim conceals the persistence of conservative sexual norms. That Kylara's promiscuity is ultimately "*punished* (by law, by society, by God)" with the traumatic loss of her dragon emphasises this (Delany 119, original emphasis). The disconnect between the series' explicit *statements* about sexuality, both in interactions between characters and in focalised narration, and its *portrayals* of sexuality is repeated in its treatment of homosexuality.

While both the series and the majority of scholarship on sexuality in *Pern* focus on heterosexual relationships, by demographics the vast majority of mating flights involve female greens with male bronzes, browns, or blues. While both Brizzi and Roberts briefly allude to the representation of homosexuality, neither discusses it in depth. Brizzi notes that "when the green dragon flies to mate, her [male] rider [...] is impelled to engage in homosexual intercourse with the rider of the dragon who flies her" and identifies (but does not analyse) "several sympathetic portrayals of homosexual love" in *Moreta: Dragonlady of Pern* (46, 50). Roberts cites Brizzi and links

the portrayal of homosexuality to the description of Weyrs as sexually open, observing that “[e]ven in terms of sexual relationships, flexibility is required” (47), but she does not offer any sustained analysis.<sup>3</sup> At the time of *Pern*’s main narrative, all or almost all riders of green dragons are male, and, as a result, sex between men is an ordinary part of Weyr life; as we see beginning in the second book, *Dragonquest*, this extends beyond mating flights. McCaffrey said in interviews that bronze dragons Impress heterosexual men, browns heterosexual or bisexual men, blues bisexual men, and greens exclusively homosexual men (or, occasionally, heterosexual women), and while this division of sexuality is not specifically delineated within the series, elements of it are alluded to throughout.<sup>4</sup> This ranges from oblique assertions that “Weyrbred is best for dragonkind. Particularly for greens” (*Dragonquest* 27) to one character’s observation that it “was to be expected” (*Masterharper* 74) that a particular prospective rider Impressed a green. Despite *Pern*’s narrative focus on heterosexual relationships and the marginalisation of homosexuality within its narrative, then, male homosexuality is central to its world-building. To explore the effects of this centrality, I examine three particular moments in the series: first, the representation of the first identified same-sex couple in the series in *Dragonquest*; second, the hatching sequence in *Dragonquest* and the implications of the hierarchy of dragon colours; and, finally, the assessment of male green riders in *Red Star Rising/Dragonseye*.

#### “Dragons don’t like bullies”: Villainous, Effeminate, Lesser

While the first *Pern* book, *Dragonflight* (1968), focuses on the relationship between a bronze rider and a queen rider, avoiding the question of sex between men, *Dragonquest* begins with a confrontation between the brown rider F’nor and two male riders from another Weyr: the green rider T’reb and the brown rider B’naj. We are introduced to them through their dragons:

*Beth and Seventh from Fort Weyr*, Canth told his rider, but the names were not familiar to F’nor.

[...]

“Are you joining them?” he asked the big brown.

*They are together*, Canth replied so pragmatically that F’nor chuckled to himself.

The green Beth, then, had agreed to brown Seventh’s advances. Looking at her brilliant color, F’nor thought their riders shouldn’t have brought that pair away from their home Weyr at this phase. As F’nor watched, the brown dragon extended his wing and covered the green possessively (14, original emphasis).<sup>5</sup>

The dragons here form a heterosexual couple – and one that Canth’s “*They are together*” and F’nor’s oblique “at this phase” imply may be close to mating, a possibility ultimately borne out by the text – but readers of the series should, by this point, already be aware that their riders will both be men. While *Pern* emphasises that dragons’ riders do not decide their dragons’ choice of sexual partners, this image of the draconic couple sets up the relationship between T’reb and B’naj: T’reb

tells F'nor to "warn [his dragon Canth] off Beth" (16), which the narration, focalised through F'nor, takes as confirmation of their relationship, describing B'naj as T'reb's "Weyrmate," a term which is used through the series to indicate romantic and sexual connection (16). F'nor further describes T'reb as "a rider whose green's *amours* affected his own temper," and T'reb ultimately attacks F'nor with his belt knife when F'nor attempts to stop him from appropriating a decorated knife commissioned by a Lord Holder; the characterisation of green riders as emotional and unstable persists throughout the series (16, original emphasis).

It is not a coincidence, I think, that T'reb and B'naj are the first representatives of the 'Oldtimers,' dragonriders who were brought forward in time at the end of *Dragonflight*. The plot of *Dragonquest* follows the political conflict between the Oldtimers and the Holds, Crafts, and dragonriders of the series' present. Where *Dragonflight* saw the Oldtimers as heroes, *Dragonquest* portrays the most prominent Oldtimers negatively: they are conservative, obsessed with 'tradition,' and unable to accept the changes in Pernese culture in the four hundred years between their past and the present they have arrived in. This dissatisfaction ultimately turns violent. That the first Oldtimers we meet are this unflatteringly portrayed same-sex couple serves to emphasise that there is something not quite *right* about the Oldtimers in general.

T'reb's attempt to claim the decorated knife in the opening scene of the novel is also a reminder of the particular status of Weyrs within *Pern's* social world: as defenders of all life on *Pern*, dragonriders are traditionally entitled to certain privileges, including the right to appropriate luxury goods from Holds and Crafts. The sexual openness of Weyrs is another aspect of this privileged social and economic status, both resented and desired by Holders, who are at once reliant on the Weyrs for protection and suspicious of dragonriders' freedom of movement, freedom from manual labour, and distinct social and sexual mores. The privileged status of dragonriders as the highest class of *Pern's* highly stratified society is a central point of contention in *Dragonquest* and, indeed, throughout the series.

T'reb and B'naj introduce a key aspect of the homophobia that underlies *Pern's* representation of homosexuality: the specifically *moral* hierarchy, even within the Weyr, that positions heterosexual relationships and heterosexual men as the 'best' and homosexual relationships and homosexual men as morally inferior. This is made explicit later in *Dragonquest*, when Jaxom, a young Lord Holder, and his friend Felessan attend a hatching, during which Felessan makes a significant offhand comment: "Didja see? Birto got a bronze and Pellomar only Impressed a green. Dragons don't like bullies and Pellomar's been the biggest bully in the Weyr. Good for you, Birto!" (279). Given how emphatic the series is that dragonriders cherish their dragons above all else, an unconditional love that dragons reciprocate, the implications of this moment are incredibly striking. Felessan – born and raised in a Weyr – can be taken as representative of dragonriders' attitudes towards dragon colours: Birto's bronze marks him as both heterosexual and *morally superior* to Pellomar, who is marked as homosexual by virtue of being "only" paired with a green, apparently a *punishment* for "the biggest bully in the Weyr."<sup>6</sup> This hierarchy is complicated, however, by the apparently essential role that green dragons – and so, by extension, sex between men – play within the social and sexual culture of the Weyr. When the aging leaders of the last group of villainous Oldtimers make a final attempt to seize political power, one of their complaints is precisely that the Weyr they have been exiled to lacks

green dragons: "Our queens are too old to rise: there are no greens to give the males relief" (*White Dragon* 255). When an Oldtimer who is reconciled to the present political situation volunteers to take charge of his fellows, his first request is similar: "I'll need some greens" (*White Dragon* 281). Although Weyr society sees green riders as morally inferior, then, it requires green dragons, and so, by extension, their riders: homosexuality is sexually and socially necessary for a Weyr to function as it is supposed to. It becomes remarkable only when it is *absent*, or when the Weyr's sexual culture is being contrasted with that of Holds and Crafts: the affirmation that "Weyrbred is best for dragonkind. Particularly for greens" marks an awareness that prospective riders raised in a Weyr are more likely to be unperturbed by the dynamics of Weyr sexual culture (*Dragonquest* 27).

Since *Pern* was published over a period of more than forty years, it is unsurprising that its representation of homosexuality shifts. Where T'reb and B'naj are somewhere between unpleasant and actively villainous, later green and blue rider characters are more sympathetically portrayed. The prequel novel *Moreta: Dragonlady of Pern* (1983) includes a blue rider, K'lon, who plays a significant supporting role and the novel positions the Weyrleader Sh'gall's homophobic attitudes as a Hold prejudice inappropriate to his position: Sh'gall "had never developed any compassion or understanding of the green and blue riders and their associations" (57). This alienates some riders, including K'lon, whose "discontent with the change in leadership had been aggravated by Sh'gall's overt disapproval of K'lon's association with the [...] green rider A'murry" (118). K'lon and other blue and green riders are positively represented, and their "associations" – including one between a green rider and a male non-dragonrider – are treated comparably to heterosexual relationships within the Weyr. Nevertheless, the hierarchy established in the early books remains in effect: bronze riders, as heterosexual men, are the 'best' dragonriders, and all others, but especially green riders, are inferior both socially and still, to some extent, morally. K'lon, for example, is described by a bronze rider – someone at the top of the sexual hierarchy – as "a good fellow," but this is qualified by the observation that "I don't say that about just any blue rider" (245). It is telling that, except for the late prequel *Red Star Rising* (published in North America with some textual alterations as *Dragonseye*) and a single scene in *Moreta*, the narrative is never focalised through a blue or male green rider: even when they play significant roles in the narrative, characters like K'lon are side characters, not protagonists.

Even *Red Star Rising*, where part of the narrative *is* focalised through a blue rider, also includes one of the series' most explicitly homophobic passages. First, the bronze rider K'vin reflects on the lack of female candidates for new greens during a hatching:

Only five girls stood on the Hatching Ground vying to attract the attention of the greens. [...] As K'vin thought that a good third or even half of this clutch might be greens, he hoped there'd be enough suitable 'lads' to impress the green hatchlings. (73)

That K'vin's narration places "lads" in quotation marks raises the possibility that he sees these prospective riders, who have "demonstrated homosexual preferences in their holds" (*Dragonseye*



70), as *not* male, but something else, paralleling *Moreta's* description of the bronze rider Sh'gall as "[f]ully male" (*Moreta* 57), in contrast to blue and green riders. The rest of the passage emphasises that this distance from heterosexual masculinity is negative:

His study of Thread fighting tactics also indicated that greens with male riders tended to be more volatile, apt to ignore their Weyrleaders' orders in the excitement of a fall: in short, they tended to unnecessarily show off their bravery to the rest of the Weyr. [...] There had been a monograph on the advantages of female over male green riders in Threadfall. Although the text allowed the reader to make his own decision, K'vin had fallen on the side of preferring females when Search provided them. Certainly their personalities were more stable and they posed fewer problems to the Weyrleaders. Young male green riders could go into emotional declines if they lost their weyrmates and be useless in Fall, sometimes even suiciding in their distress. (*Red Star Rising* 73)

K'vin clearly distinguishes between female green riders and male green riders, who are unstable, "apt to ignore their Weyrleader's orders," and overly emotional to the point of suicide. While *Red Star Rising/Dragonseye* includes a sympathetically portrayed blue and green rider couple, with the narrative focalised through the blue rider at several points, this passage serves as a reminder that despite a level of tolerance, male green riders are still regarded as *lesser* than both female green riders and other male riders. Even if some of the latter are themselves homosexual – "[blue riders] don't generally like girls" (*Dragonseye* 250) – they are nonetheless understood to be "definitely male" ("An Interview"). Tellingly, the version of this passage published in *Dragonseye* (68-69) is significantly abridged (roughly one third of the passage is cut), deemphasising the temperamental differences between male and female green riders and removing the suggestion of same-sex relationships; while we can only speculate about the reasons, the extent of the abridgement highlights the homophobic elements of the original version.

That *Pern's* portrayal of homosexuality is fundamentally homophobic is clear. I argue that the explicit and implicit homophobia that runs through the series functions as a containment strategy for sexual difference. Heterosexuality and homosexuality in *Pern* appear to be organised hierarchically in a similar way to our primary world, where, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick puts it, the apparent binary opposition of heterosexual/homosexual "actually subsist[s] in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation" within which "the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B" (10). In order to maintain the privileged position of heterosexuality, which relies on homosexuality to constitute itself, *Pern* must bracket homosexuality in a manner closely paralleling the primary world, where homosexuality is socially constructed in order "both to delineate the boundaries of acceptable behavior for all men and to contain the threat of deviance, at once stigmatizing it and suggesting that it is confined to a 'deviant' minority"

(Chauncey 22-23). Intratextually, homosexuality (along with non-normative heterosexual practices) is acknowledged, but it is narratively isolated and geographically contained within the speculative space of the Weyr, where it exists alongside dragons. It remains unspeakable within Holds and Crafts, which resemble a historical medieval setting. The presence of homophobia and the marginalisation of homosexuality also serve to deemphasise aspects of the text that might otherwise have drawn negative attention in the extratextual world. I suspect, for example, that it is neither a coincidence nor an error that Lytol, a former dragonrider, is identified in *Dragonflight* as having been “a green rider” (16) – and thus implicitly homosexual – only to have his dragon referred to in *Dragonquest* as “his dead brown” (224). This rewriting occurs as Lytol becomes a major supporting character in his role as guardian of the young Lord Holder Jaxom, one of the main characters of *Dragonquest* and subsequent books in the series, whom Lytol raises from infancy. Repositioning Lytol as a brown rider situates him more securely in the realm of heterosexual masculinity, making him an ‘appropriate’ role model for a young boy and, as unfortunately emphasised by the present political climate, avoiding the homophobic association of homosexuality with paedophilia. My point is that *Pern*’s intense anxiety about homosexuality paradoxically serves to foreground it as an integral aspect of, as Ekman and Taylor put it, “the world’s architecture” (12). The result is that despite the denigration of homosexuality, readers are constantly confronted with its *presence* – it is a necessary implication of McCaffrey’s construction of dragon biology and the gender distribution of dragonriders, even as it is relegated to the margins of the textual world.<sup>7</sup>

The fact remains, however, that homosexuality constantly escapes these various structures of confinement. *Dragonquest* begins with T’reb and B’naj literally escaping the Weyr with their dragons, bringing their sexuality into the public sphere of Hold and Craft: T’reb’s dragon Seventh’s mating flight nearly begins while T’reb and B’naj are at a Crafthall. It is telling that when the Weyrleaders gather to address the altercation between F’nor and T’reb, their primary concern becomes whether T’reb was wrong to bring “a green in mating heat outside her weyr” (30-31). In context, the underlying concern appears to be that the mating flight may remind non-riders of, and possibly implicate them in, the sexual dynamics that are supposed to be contained within the Weyr: “A mating female dragon broadcast her emotions on a wide band. Some green-brown pairings were as loud as bronze-gold. [...] Humans were susceptible, too, and innocent Hold youngsters often responded with embarrassing consequences” (20). Even without Weyr intervention, there are indications that there is some consciousness of homosexuality in Holds and Crafts. When the Crafter father of the protagonist of *The Masterharper of Pern* (1998) comments that it “was to be expected” that a particular Hold boy Impressed a green, he offers no explanation, but the observation implies both an awareness of homosexuality and the sexual dynamics of the Weyr and also the presence, even if disavowed, of homosexuality – and perhaps a normative value judgment that renders it as *queerness* – outside the Weyr (74).

These references highlight *Pern*’s anxiety about homosexuality. Despite the homophobia that accompanies them, their frequency sets the series in contrast to some more neutral or positive portrayals of queerness in twentieth-century Fantastika fiction. In particular, I think we can productively contrast *Pern* with Delany’s reading of Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974),

which is contemporary to the early *Pern* books. Where *Pern* is anxious about homosexuality, *The Dispossessed* treats it, ostensibly, as an unremarkable part of everyday life, with the society of Anarres featuring “[s]ocial acceptance of homosexuality, a social norm of promiscuity, ubiquitous adolescent bisexuality, and general communal child-rearing” (117). In its representation of its one homosexual character, however, as Delany argues, the novel ultimately implies “that ‘if he would be saved’ Bedap must change his homosexuality” (152, quoting Le Guin). In its efforts to treat homosexuality as unremarkable, the novel reduces it to an afterthought and ultimately reinscribes conservative social norms.

*Pern*, meanwhile, almost obsessively attempts to distance itself from homosexuality while constantly returning to it: despite the homophobic tropes that McCaffrey’s world-building relies on, the fact remains that homosexuality is central to *Pern*’s world and *Pern*’s social structure. As a result, the series’ efforts to safely contain homosexuality fail repeatedly: although McCaffrey seems to want readers to regard homosexuality as undesirable, the importance of it to the series’ world-building means that neither the text nor readers can simply ignore the fact that there *is* a socially sanctioned space for what we might call queer life – though marginalised in both speculative and familiar ways – within its pages and world.

## Conclusions

The volume of references to homosexuality within *Pern* paradoxically means that queerness, at times including sympathetic portrayals of queer characters, becomes an integral element of *Pern*’s world-building. This, ultimately, is what draws me back to the series – the lingering questions that the text cannot or will not answer. While Anne McCaffrey may have been unable or unwilling to fully embrace the imaginative possibilities opened by *Pern*’s world-building, the fact remains that sex between men is – surprisingly, troublingly, frustratingly, tantalisingly – central to its world. In spite of itself, *Pern* is a series that is deeply embedded, *through* its own homophobia, in a kind of queerness.

This is significant, first, for critical work on *Pern*. I am arguing in part that it is impossible to account for the social dynamics of *Pern*’s setting without attending to its treatment of sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, as the negative against which it repeatedly defines itself and which structures its conception of masculinity. Brizzi’s analysis of the dragon-rider relationship (39–41) for example could, I think, be deepened by closer attention to the sexual politics of the Weyrs and the ways dragons impact their riders’ sexualities. Beyond *Pern* itself the ways in which the series fails to contain or repress homosexuality when it attempts to do so encourage us to think about how even obviously ‘problematic’ texts can move or be moved beyond the limitations of their authors, time periods, and explicit ideological positions. Despite the homophobia and the ambivalences of even *heterosexual* relationships McCaffrey has created a limited space of possibility within the Weyr: women find a relative sexual freedom, and the dynamics of mating flights and expectations around rider sexuality create a space where homosexuality and other forms of queer life are not only possible but commonplace and indeed required for Weyr society to function. That this seems at times accidental rather than intentional is precisely what opens space for the kind of queer reading

I am undertaking. The frustrating gap between what the series says about Weyr sexuality and what the series *does* does not erase the possibilities opened, however incompletely, by *Pern*'s lip service to sexual freedom.

*Pern* is not a queer utopia; it is far from Delany's Velm in *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984), and even from the 'ambiguous utopia' of Le Guin's *Anarres*. Though it is unlikely that McCaffrey set out to present a utopia, there is, nonetheless, a limited "anticipatory illumination of queerness" (Muñoz 22) that links present and future (and, through *Pern*'s feudalism, past) in unexpected ways. This is unexpected but possible precisely because of *Pern*'s anxiety about the implications of its world-building. Against its own impulses, *Pern* implies a future beyond "hopeless heteronormative maps of the present where futurity is indeed the province of normative reproduction" (Muñoz 28). The series is structured by contemporary homophobia such that its treatment of homosexuality is familiar: I can imagine myself as a gay man within its world – there is an explicit conceptual space for the shape of my life, the good and the bad. At the same time, it also presents a substantially different configuration of sexuality within the Weyr, one "in specific dialogue, in a specific tension, with our present concept of the real" (Delany, "Science Fiction and 'Literature,'" 69) in a way that raises enticing questions: what *would* it be like to live in a context where sex between men is normal, open, and even *necessary*?

These questions, however unintentionally they may have been posed, produce my love for *Pern* – but here my reading of *Pern*'s relationship to queerness must again be circumscribed. Gender in *Pern* is resolutely binary and cisnormative and there is, as McCaffrey suggested, no real space for women who are anything but heterosexual. Bisexual men are relegated to an intermediate position between heterosexual bronze riders and homosexual green riders: better than they could be, but not the ideal. A lesbian or a trans person – say – reading the series might not feel drawn to it in the ways that I am as a cis, gay man. At the same time, I would suggest that these apparent absences might be useful starting points: we can learn from what a text does *not* say – either explicitly or at all – as well as from the information it *does* provide. Insofar as it is precisely the denial and rejection of male homosexuality that makes it so tantalisingly visible, I think it is reasonable to wonder, for example, what a trans reading of the gender dynamics of *Pern* might look like, or what lesbian interpretive spaces might emerge from a careful reading of the women of *Pern*.

I hope someday to find out.

## NOTES

1. Anne McCaffrey died in 2011, but the series has been continued by her son Todd and daughter Gigi, with the most recent book published in 2018. Todd and Gigi McCaffrey's treatments of sexuality differ somewhat from the original series, however, and in this article I focus on books by Anne McCaffrey alone.

2. In one notorious fan interview – now available only in circulated partial transcript – McCaffrey reportedly asserted that “[i]t’s a proven fact that a single anal sex experience causes one to be homosexual. The hormones released by a sexual situation involving the anus being broached, are the same hormones found in large quantities in effeminate homosexual males” and went on to describe an incident where a formerly straight acquaintance was “involved in a rape situation involving a tent peg” that resulted in his becoming “effeminate and gay” (“[The Tent Peg Statement](#)”). This provides an indication of McCaffrey’s own homophobic (and in this case simply bizarre) views.

3. We will note that Roberts is assuming here that sex between men is something that requires “flexibility” from the participants – in other words, she assumes that it is something outside the ‘normal’ scope of the participants’ sexual desires.

4. The interviews in which McCaffrey explicitly sets out these dynamics are now available only in archived form, as the fan sites that originally hosted them no longer exist. In “[An Interview with Anne: Questions and Answers on Dragonriders of Pern](#),” she says that “[g]reen riders in my *Pern* world are ALWAYS gay males: blue riders are usually bi-sexual and browns not averse to a little of what pleases them with greens” (“An Interview”). She adds that “[b]ronze riders in my books are as masculine as gold riders are feminine,” by which she seems to mean ‘heterosexual,’ and, answering a question about lesbians and bisexual women, clarifies that female green riders are “more assertive women” but not lesbians and speculates that “I suppose a bisexual woman could ride any of the three lower orders, as it were, but not bronze and certainly not gold” (“An Interview”). Apparently McCaffrey understood women’s sexuality within a similar hierarchy to men’s, as I discuss in the next section.

5. This introduction of dragon mating dynamics also implies that F’nor, who explicitly observes that Canth has “no lack of partners” because “[g]reens would prefer a brown who was as big as most bronzes on *Pern*,” regularly has sex with other men (15). The series ignores this, however, focusing exclusively on his relationship with the queen rider Brekke, whose discomfort with the sexual dynamics of the Weyr would seem to foreclose the possibility of anything but a monogamous relationship (168).

6. In the context of “The Tent Peg Statement,” which implies that green riders are always the receiving partner during mating flight-induced anal sex, we might also read in this an implied threat of sexual violence: the punishment would be Pellomar’s future role during the sometimes-violent sexual encounters of mating flights, whether he (initially) desires this or not.

7. This also raises the question of authorial intention, especially in the context of McCaffrey’s statements about *Pern* in interviews, some of which I have discussed previously: *why* did she choose to include homosexuality explicitly within the series in the ways she did? We can, ultimately, only speculate, but (for better or for worse) it is clear from interviews that she *had* thought about at least some of the implications of this choice. This combination of factors – clear intention to include homosexuality, the wild homophobia of some of her public statements about the series

(which are widely known in fan spaces and easily discoverable online), and the inconsistencies and contradictions (and outright homophobia) within the text – is part of what I have been trying to sort through in this essay.

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## BIONOTE

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