

Coming Out in an Alternative World in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Heritage of Hastur* and *Sharra's Exile*

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ABSTRACT

The present article analyzes same-sex relationships as portrayed in Marion Zimmer Bradley's novels *The Heritage of Hastur* (1975) and *Sharra's Exile* (1981). Both novels belong to the genre of science fantasy (a hybrid of science fiction and fantasy) and are set in the alternative world of Darkover. Yet, despite the opportunities offered by the fantastic genre, the coming out of the novels' protagonists, Regis Hastur and Danilo Syrtis, is only a thinly veiled version of a coming out in contemporary Western society, bringing together commonplace themes such as the various levels of social acceptance of homosexuality, the strong repression of past experience, child abuse, together with the associated corruption of adults trying to cover it up, and social pressure to marry and preserve an impeccable public image. Even though the author does not offer any radical views on homosexuality in these two novels, from the perspective of gay literature scholarship the novels do expand the ways coming out is treated in literature and may serve as a bridge between readers of realistic fiction and the fantastic genres.

KEYWORDS

American literature, gay literature, coming out, science fiction, fantasy, Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Heritage of Hastur*, *Sharra's Exile*, Darkover

A typical coming-out story was long perceived as a realistic story describing a plausible journey of a gay/lesbian/bisexual/queer person to accepting his/her sexual identity. However, since the mid-1980s coming-out novels that foray into magical realism, such as Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) or Jim Grimsley's *Dream Boy* (1995), have started to appear and gain high critical acclaim. Perhaps not so surprisingly, there is also a whole world of gay genre literature, even though it is often only fleetingly acknowledged by mainstream critics. Even Gregory Woods, in his monumental *A History of Gay Literature* (1998), only noted briefly: "There are now many alternatives to the heterosexist norms of mainstream popular fiction. Indeed, some of the most famous of popular novelists are gay or lesbian; it does not get said often enough. The distinguished names of Ursula Le Guin, Samuel Delany and Clive Barker are the first which come to mind."¹ Then he devoted a single page to Delany and Barker. Other authors of popular genres are briefly acknowledged in a single paragraph: "Gay literature as a whole has been greatly enriched by such work as the detective fiction of Joseph Hansen and, more recently, Michael Nava, or the gay male romances of women novelists like Patricia Nell Warren and Chris Hunt."²

It is rather telling that a list of recommended gay fiction compiled by Richard Labonté, published as an appendix to the influential anthology *Boys like Us: Gay Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories* (ed. Patrick Merla, 1996),³ includes a miscellany of books,

- 1 Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 245.
- 2 Woods, *A History of Gay Literature*, 246.
- 3 See Richard Labonté, "Selected Bibliography," in *Boys like Us: Gay Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories*, ed. Patrick Merla (New York: Avon Books, 1996), 352–64.

but only one science fiction or fantasy book: Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Heritage of Hastur* (1975), a science fiction/fantasy novel which, in addition to the story of uniting two different worlds, portrays the coming of age, or, to be more exact, coming out of its main protagonist.

Marion Zimmer Bradley (1930–1999) is a celebrated author of science fiction and fantasy, who is known to the general public mostly for her *The Mists of Avalon* (1983), a feminist version of the Arthurian legend, and to the science fiction/fantasy community for her Darkover series, which depicts life on a faraway planet inhabited by the survivors of the wreck of a lost ship from Terra (the planet Earth, thinly disguised). The civilization on Darkover regresses to a pre-modern social system and its members develop telepathic abilities, uncovering and taming powers unknown to Terrans. After uncountable centuries of many ups and downs, the Darkover civilization is once again reunited with the Terrans at the end of the book series. Interestingly, some novels in the series show a strong feminist perspective and, indeed, Bradley is considered to be one of the founders of feminist science fiction.

The Heritage of Hastur is a novel from the last period covered by the series. It is followed by another novel, *Sharra's Exile* (1981), whose events take place six years after those of *The Heritage of Hastur*, leading to the point of Darkover accepting its place as a Terran colony, thus paradoxically gaining more rights than its previous legal status allowed. The two novels were released together as the omnibus volumes *The Children of Hastur* in 1982 and *Heritage and Exile* in 2002.⁴

The protagonists of both novels are Regis Hastur, the fifteen-year-old heir to the most powerful Comyn (aristocratic) family on Darkover, and Lew Alton, a man five or six years older than Regis and the heir to another domain. Both novels are composed as a series of alternating chapters; Regis is the focalizer in the chapters focusing on him, while Lew is the narrator of the other chapters. Lew Alton is a *nedestro* (illegitimate) child of Lord Alton and a half-Terran woman. Because of this, he was not recognized as the lawful heir of the domain; however, his father forces the Comyn council to recognize Lew, who later becomes instrumental in waking up the lost Sharra matrix,⁵ an event which ends in disaster. In *Sharra's Exile*, Lew contributes to the destruction of Sharra, and after Darkover has become a Terran colony again, he becomes the first Senator from the planet.

While Lew is a powerful telepath, Regis is believed not to possess *laran*, the ability of telepathy, and actually has no intention of assuming his role as the Hastur heir; instead, he admires the Terran technology of spaceships and dreams of travel to other planets. Even though Regis is legally an adult, his grandfather persuades him to spend three years in the Guards to undergo basic military training; after that, the grandfather promises to support Regis in his travels. Regis agrees, only to discover later that this was one of his grandfather's machinations. In the Guards, Regis befriends Danilo Syrtis, a protégé of Regis's uncle and Lew's father, Lord Alton, who had supported Danilo to give him a good start in life, i.e., something his own noble but impoverished family could not afford. It is also revealed that Danilo's elder brother was the paxman (guard and companion) of Regis's father and he died while trying in vain to save him before Regis was born.

4 See Marion Zimmer Bradley, *Heritage and Exile* (New York: DAW, 2002). The citations refer to this edition, which is plagued with many typographical errors but remains the only one in print.

5 Every telepath carries a matrix, "a jewel stone that amplifies the resonances of the brain and transmutes psi power into energy." Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Heritage of Hastur*, in *Heritage and Exile* (New York: DAW, 2002), 32.

While Regis and Danilo quickly become friends, with Regis feeling what Danilo feels, Danilo later grows more and more distant, to the point where he accuses Regis of being an *ombredin*, a lover of men. Shortly after that, Danilo is accused of attacking a superior, Lord Dyan, and expelled from the Guards in ignominy. However, Regis later discovers that Lord Dyan abused and psychically tortured Danilo through his *laran*, which is an unprecedented transgression. Regis later explains to Danilo's father that his son is an innocent and honorable man and Danilo becomes Regis's sworn paxman, which initiates a more intimate relationship between them.

As can be seen, *The Heritage of Hastur* and *Sharra's Exile* are hardly realistic novels, which is a clear departure from the dominant mode of American gay literature published after World War II, yet readers may have trouble labeling the novels as science fiction or fantasy. John Clute comments on the distinction between the genres when he defines science fiction as one of "the genres of the fantastic, a term which also encompasses fantasy, supernatural fiction and supernatural horror. [...] By contrast with fantasy – which can be quickly defined as a body of self-coherent but impossible narratives – the label sf normally designates a text whose story is explicitly or implicitly extrapolated from scientific or historical premises. In other words, whether or not an sf story is plausible it can at least be *argued*."⁶ While the parts of the novels that cover the Terran civilization, with its advanced technology, such as spaceships and interstellar travel, are pure science fiction, the parts covering the Darkover civilization, with its *laran* and matrix "technology," defying the laws of physics, represent fantasy. A solution to this conundrum is provided by science fiction author Brian Stableford, who, in his *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature*, recognizes *The Heritage of Hastur* as a hybrid form which he calls *science fantasy*.⁷

However, I will use the term *fantastic literature* as an exact genre classification is actually not essential for the following discussion: both science fiction and fantasy (and thus also the hybrid form of science fantasy) portray societies whose social order (often dystopian or utopian) may deviate significantly from those of modern Western societies. Both genres have always served as a testing ground for various social phenomena, including sexuality. Pioneering researchers of gay and lesbian themes in fantastic literature Eric Garber and Lyn Paleo argue that "[f]antastic literature is an ideal genre from which to examine [...] attitudes [to sexual variety] because of its ability to envision possibilities. Fantastic literature has always contained depictions of homosexuality, both female and male. It also has contained portrayals of androgynes, transsexuals, gender-switching people, and alien sexuality that is clearly not heterosexual."⁸

Indeed, it makes a difference if the novels under analysis are viewed through the lens of gay literature scholarship or through that of science fiction or fantasy scholarship. The present article offers the former perspective and thus it has to be noted that while fantastic literature has always provided an opportunity to explore alternative sexualities, this area had been largely unresearched until the 1980s, when a number of scholarly and reference publications appeared, such as Eric Garber⁹ and Lyn Paleo's *Uranian Worlds: A Reader's Guide to Alternative Sexuality in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1983, 2nd edition added horror stories to its coverage in 1990). Moreover, a number of science fiction and fantasy

6 John Clute, "Science Fiction," in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, ed. John Clute and John Grant (London: Orbit, 1997), 844; italics in the original.

7 See Brian Stableford, *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 49.

8 Eric Garber and Lyn Paleo, *Uranian Worlds: A Guide to Alternative Sexuality in Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror*, 2nd ed. (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990), vii.

9 Eric Garber (1951–1995) is an editor and scholar of fantastic literature; Eric Garber is, coincidentally, also the real name of "Andrew Holleran" (*1944), a major figure in American gay literature.

anthologies were published throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s. The second edition of *Uranian Worlds* lists 935 fantastic works with gay and lesbian content, which also means that Labonté's inclusion of *The Heritage of Hastur* in his list was indeed a random catch; it also demonstrates how much gay fantastic literature was neglected.

Seen from this perspective, there are indeed some surprising affinities between gay literature and fantastic literature. Coming out, the central issue of gay experience and therefore the quintessential theme of gay literature, is closely related to the general issue of coming of age, which is, in turn, a stock theme of fantastic literature. Moreover, Al Muller and C. W. Sullivan III argue that in "a sense, all science fiction and fantasy novels deal with initiation in that the human race is being initiated as the characters are cast into possible futures of marvelous alternate worlds."¹⁰ It is noteworthy that while Muller and Sullivan do not distinguish between science fiction and fantasy, they do notice a sometimes unclear difference between young adult and adult literature, only to conclude that "the distinction is all the more blurred when one is discussing science fiction and fantasy authors."¹¹

Whether taken primarily in the context of either gay literature or fantastic literature, the question remains as to whether the treatment of homosexuality in *The Heritage of Hastur* and its sequel *Sharra's Exile* is in any way different from that in realistic novels. I will argue that while writing a coming-out novel in the fantastic tradition expands the possibilities of such novels by using the inherent possibilities of the genre itself, the two novels, rather surprisingly, present a version of coming out that is perfectly intelligible to contemporary readers.

In accordance with the conventions of the genre, a number of elements make Darkover society different from Western culture at first sight. The most important of these is the system of kinship terms. Virtually any relationship between two families, even generations ago, qualifies its members to consider each other kinsmen and kinswomen, with *cousin* being a more intimate universal term, still allowing a deviation of many steps in lineage. The closest connection, *bredu* and *breda*, is not limited to brothers and sisters either but is also used between lovers as the most intimate term. Moreover, the system of blood relations is supplemented with a developed system of fostering and legitimizing *nedestro* (illegitimate) children. The complexity of family relationships after generations of intermarriage can be seen in the full names of the protagonists: Regis-Rafael Felix Alar Hastur y Elhalyn, Danilo-Felix Kennard Lindir-Syrtis, and Lewis-Kennard Montray-Alton.

Adulthood is legally reached at fifteen on Darkover, and marriages are commonly arranged by power interests rather than by free choice. Moreover, same-sex relationships are rather common and are not sanctioned in extremely negative terms either in adolescence or later in life:

It was not considered anything so shameful to be an *ombredin*, a lover of men. Among boys too young for marriage, rigidly kept apart by custom from any women except their own sisters or cousins, it was considered rather more suitable to seek companionship and even love from their friends than to consort with such women as were common to all. It was eccentric, perhaps, in a man of Dyan's years, but certainly not shameful.¹²

10 Al Muller and C. W. Sullivan III, "Young Adult Literature: Science Fiction and Fantasy Book Series," *English Journal* 69, no. 7 (October 1980): 71.

11 Muller and Sullivan, "Young Adult Literature," 71.

12 Bradley, *The Heritage of Hastur*, 191; italics in the original.

While this particular society and its social system are clearly unique and cannot be found in any human society, present or past, it is an amalgam of elements known in human cultures. This comes as no surprise, as the Darkover civilization was based on a lost Terran spaceship, which is obvious from the languages. A Terran explains to Lew: "Linguists studying your language found traces of three Terran languages. Spanish [in] your *casta*; English and Gaelic in your *cahuenga*, and the Dry-Town languages. The language spoken in the Hellers is a form of pure Gaelic which is no longer spoken on Terra but survives in old manuscripts."¹³ Indeed, many cultures have more complex systems of kinship than the present-day Western Anglophone world; e.g., the naming patterns on Darkover are reminiscent of those used in Spanish. While the age of majority in Western countries is usually eighteen, such an age, as well as the age of consent, varies widely across the world. Arranging marriages among aristocratic families for property or power reasons used to be quite common even in Europe. Same-sex relationships that are accepted as a temporary part of growing up can be found in many cultures across the globe. All of these variants of human societies are studied by social anthropology, yet it is the privilege of an author of a fictional work written in the tradition of a fantastic genre to merge selected elements of existing societies into a new invented one.

While the acceptance of same-sex relationships in Darkover society is greater than it was in American society when the two novels were published in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, characters experience coming out whenever their relationship is not based on a temporary relief of loneliness or sexual tension but on their permanent sexual orientation. Indeed, same-sex relationships are named and institutionalized, which means they come close to the modern social institution of homosexuality. The following thematic analysis is intentionally eclectic in order to focus primarily on the status of same-sex relationships in the two novels; the battle for the future of Darkover, and thus the conflict between so-called "primitive" societies and modern Terran civilization, and its ramifications, will mostly be ignored and referred to only when necessary.

Coming out in the novel can be seen in both common meanings of the expression, both as one's self-acceptance as a gay person and a public declaration of one's sexual orientation and acceptance by others. When Regis, who feels that he is an outcast because of his lack of *laran*, shares his intention to travel in space after his return from a monastery with his grandfather, Lord Hastur, looking for the reasons for Regis's plan, asks "You're not, by chance, an *ombredin*?" Regis replies: "In a *cristoforo* monastery? Not likely. No, sir, not even for pastime. And certainly not as a way of life."¹⁴ At his point, the answer is a frank one, as Regis's sexuality has not awakened yet, just like his *laran*. At the same time, there is no irony in the answer when Regis denies that he indulges in same-sex relationships "even for pastime"; the recreational use of sexuality is quite common on Darkover, in all its forms. When Lord Dyan mentors Regis later, he outlines what options there are: "The Golden Cage is rather more to my liking. It's at the edge of the Terran Zone, and one can find various exotic entertainments there, even aliens and nonhumans, as well as all kinds of women. Or, [...] all kinds of men or boys."¹⁵

But Regis, while on the verge of adulthood at fifteen, is still innocent and his relationship with Danilo develops only gradually. He first notices Danilo in the entourage of his uncle and only dimly remembers that he had seen him in the monastery. They

13 Bradley, *The Heritage of Hastur*, 182-83. *Casta* and *cahuenga* are the two major languages of Darkover. For an excellent analysis of the languages, see Thorsten Renk, "A Brief Analysis of *Casta* and *Cahuenga*," 2008, <http://www.phy.duke.edu/~trenk/darkover/casta.html>.

14 Bradley, *The Heritage of Hastur*, 51; italics in the original.

15 Bradley, *The Heritage of Hastur*, 156.

become closer in the Guards, where both of them are outcasts: Danilo because of his poverty, Regis because of his being the Hastur heir. However, right from the beginning it is clear that both lads long for intimacy. When Regis realizes that it was Danilo's half-brother who tried to save his father, he tells Danilo: "Dani, your brother was my father's personal guard, they were killed at the same instant – he died trying to shield my father with his body. Did you know they are buried side by side, in one grave, on the field of Kilghairlie?" to which Danilo replies: "I didn't know [...] It must be horrible to die like that, but not so horrible if your last thought is to shield someone else. . . ." Regis agrees: "I'd like to die like that. Wouldn't you?"¹⁶ Such homoerotic sentiment sounds familiar to contemporary readers: not only does it reflect the teenage obsession with romanticized images of death, but it can also be recognized as an allusion to the Sacred Band of Thebes, a military troop made up of lovers in Ancient Greece.¹⁷

Even though they spend a lot of time together and at times Regis feels his own thoughts mixed with Danilo's (unbeknownst to Regis, his own *laran* is being awakened by his friend), Danilo becomes more and more distant. When Regis approaches him, trying to find out the reason for Danilo's obvious suffering, Danilo rejects him violently: "You come near me again, you filthy *ombredin*, and I'll break your stinking neck!"¹⁸ Yet the accusation of being an *ombredin* is still based primarily on Regis's social status as a member of the Comyn aristocracy, to which Lord Dyan belongs as well. As it transpires later, Danilo is becoming more and more distant because he is being abused by Lord Dyan, the cadet-master.

Lord Dyan's penchant for boys is a public secret, including his rather sadistic ways of training the cadets, in which he obviously took much pleasure. Even though Lord Dyan did not abuse Danilo by forced sex, he entered Danilo's mind by way of his *laran*. However, child abuse is not limited to sexual abuse. The German psychiatrist Günther Deegener defines three other forms: physical abuse (violent actions resulting in injuries to children), neglect (caused by a lack of care, clothing, feeding, medical care, supervision, or protection from danger), and emotional abuse (outright rejection, intimidation, terrorization, or isolation of a child; verbal abuse on a daily basis, locking a child in a dark room, etc.). Moreover, sexual abuse does not have to include rape or direct body contact but can be any "action that is inflicted upon or must be tolerated by a child against their own will or any action about which the child cannot make a decision due to their physical, emotional, mental, or verbal inferiority. The offenders use their position of power and authority to satisfy their own needs at the expense of these children who thus suffer discrimination as sexual objects."¹⁹ Lord Dyan's acts toward Danilo include all these forms of abuse, perhaps with the exception of neglect.

Indeed, child abuse is introduced as a theme in the novel with all the complexity and related corruption associated with it in real life: Danilo is not the first cadet to be abused by Lord Dyan. Moreover, while his acts towards young cadets are known to other Comyn lords, they are tolerated as Lord Dyan is considered an excellent officer and a little scandal here or there can be silenced. So when Danilo, tormented by Dyan, pulls a knife on him, the lad is sent down from the Guards with a dishonorable discharge, a great disgrace not only for Danilo, but also for his father.

16 Bradley, *The Heritage of Hastur*, 76.

17 See Plutarch, "Pelopidas," in *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), 5:383–87.

18 Bradley, *The Heritage of Hastur*, 139; italics in the original.

19 See Günther Deegener, "Child Abuse," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001), 1672.

However, Regis, upon learning what really happened, tries to vindicate Danilo's honor and reputation. As his efforts are rejected by other Comyn, he goes directly to Danilo, who only requests that his name be cleared before his ageing father, which Regis promises. Danilo, realizing what his late brother, as well as his whole family, did for the Hastur clan, offers to serve Regis. "There is a life between us. My brother died to shield your father. As for me, I ask no more than to give my life in the service of Hastur. Take my sword and my oath, Lord Regis. By the hand I place on your sword, I pledge my life."²⁰ Regis accepts and after the ritual of making Danilo his paxman, he kisses him and says: "Now you've only had formally what we both knew all along, *bredu*."²¹ While the formalized relationship between a paxman and his lord does not presuppose a sexual relationship, it certainly does not exclude one, as in the case between Regis and Danilo.

When Regis remarks that they "both knew all along," he points out that the budding relationship between the boys coincided with the awakening of his *laran*. This happened, unbeknownst to him, because of Danilo, who turned out to be perhaps the only surviving catalyst telepath, i.e., one who is able to activate *laran* in others. Even though Regis was told that he had the potential, he had been unable to use his *laran* until his contact with Danilo. However, after awakening their *laran*, telepaths must learn how to master it, because otherwise they suffer from threshold sickness as a result of overflowing their brains with too much information.

The threshold sickness was really intense in Regis, who, in the midst of his hallucinations, started to remember that a few years previously there had been something sexual between him and Lew. While sexual contacts and experimentation were common in Darkover society and, if consensual, they were not considered child abuse, Regis, for some reason, had repressed his memories of the intimate moments with Lew, and suppressed his *laran* along with the memories. Still, repression is another frequent theme in the scholarly discourse on trauma.²²

Regis's coming out is thus not significantly different from what is common in contemporary Western societies. *The Heritage of Hastur* ends with the vindication of Danilo. Lord Dyan publicly admits all the wrongs done to Danilo, who accepts his apology. Moreover, and rather ironically, Danilo also becomes heir and foster-child to Lord Dyan and thus rises in status from being the heir of an honorable yet impoverished family to being the heir of a Comyn domain, which entails a seat in the Comyn council. Danilo thus becomes an equal to Regis but still his sworn paxman.

Sharra's Exile takes place six years later, when Regis and Danilo are twenty-one. While the novel's main plotline concerns the destruction of the Sharra matrix and Darkover becoming one of the Terran colonies, the relationship between Regis and Danilo still remains an important theme. Their relationship continues, even though they do not live together; instead, they spend more and more time taking care of their respective domains. After a night spent together, Regis remarks to Danilo: "There's only one good thing about Council season [...] I get to see you now and then."²³ The couple is, at their age, forced to make arrangements for their future.

Their relationship is no secret in their families, and while Lord Dyan accepts it, Regis's grandfather strongly disapproves of it. Both Regis and Danilo are being forced

20 Bradley, *The Heritage of Hastur*, 169.

21 Bradley, *The Heritage of Hastur*, 170; italics in the original.

22 A detailed exploration of trauma in literature can be found, e.g., in Marcel Arbeit, "Lewis Nordan – *Lightning Song*," in *Still in Print: The Southern Novel Today*, ed. Jan Nordby Gretlund (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 216–30.

23 Marion Zimmer Bradley, *Sharra's Exile*, in *Heritage and Exile* (New York: DAW, 2002), 618.

to marry, as it is their responsibility to produce or foster heirs to their families. Ironically, Lord Dyan, himself an *ombredin*, tries to persuade Danilo to marry so that he can foster Dyan's *nedestro* son. Danilo thus considers a solution that is perfectly familiar and practiced in Western culture, a cover-up marriage. He says: "I think [...] that I shall take one who will find herself a devoted Lady-companion; and after I have given her a child or two to raise, she will not weep if I absent myself from her bed and fireside. Then we should both be content."²⁴

And it was also Lord Dyan who revealed to Danilo that Regis had fathered a son. Danilo is hurt as he says: "Why, Regis, what is it to do with me, if you have love affairs with women?"²⁵ Regis indicates clearly that fathering children was done only to provide more heirs to the domain: "You know the answer to that [...] I have no *love affairs* with women. You know that things like this must happen, while I am Heir to Hastur. Comyn Heirs at stud in the Domains – that's what it amounts to! [...] And I am damned if I'll marry someone they choose for me, as if I were a stud horse! That's what it was, and that is *all* it was. [...] I am a libertine only with women, Dani, but no doubt I have given you cause to think otherwise."²⁶ This confession brings all the common issues of the closet into play once again: the necessity to fulfill one's social obligations, and subsequently the necessity to separate the physical and emotional levels of sexuality, thus hurting one's lover.

For readers of gay literature who are not familiar with fantastic literature, *The Heritage of Hastur* and *Sharra's Exile* may be quite surprising. While both novels are set in an alternative world with a unique combination of social norms, this world is an amalgam of known human cultures and societies. Same-sex relationships are part and parcel of the society and are institutionalized in a way similar to homosexuality in present-day Western societies, as can be seen in the present thematic analysis of the novel: themes of coming out, child abuse in all its forms and complexity, repression of a past experience, and the necessity to negotiate an alternative future for an *ombredin*, often in conflict with one's expectations and obligations, are explored in the two fantastic novels in a way that is not significantly different from the body of realistic gay fiction and from the real-life experience of readers. The science fantasy genre in this case thus provides only a thinly veiled version of the issues readers face in everyday life. This provides some relief from the necessary veracity of realistic coming-out narratives, yet for radical explorations and reevaluations of sexuality readers have to turn elsewhere.

24 Bradley, *Sharra's Exile*, 619. The motif of a cover-up marriage often occurs in lesbian fiction, in which the characters are frequently forced to enter into a heterosexual marriage. As Michaela Weiss points out, "For many women, the open admission of a different sexual orientation has always been potentially harmful and destructive, taking into consideration family and economic conditions that could prevent them from enjoying and fully discovering their true identity." Michaela Weiss, "Tipping the History: Gender Performances and Costumes That Matter in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet*," *Moravian Journal of Literature and Film* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 57.

25 Bradley, *Sharra's Exile*, 435.

26 Bradley, *Sharra's Exile*, 435; italics in the original.

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