

A Queer Reading of Rick Riordan's Children's Fantasy Fiction

Satu Pennanen

251045

Pro Gradu Thesis

English Language and Culture

School of Humanities

Philosophical Faculty

University of Eastern Finland

May 2019

Tiedekunta Filosofinen tiedekunta		Osasto Humanistinen osasto		
Tekijät Satu Pennanen				
Työn nimi A Queer Reading of Rick Riordan's Children's Fantasy Fiction				
Pääaine	Työn laji	Päivämäärä	Sivumäärä	
Englannin kieli ja kulttuuri	Pro gradu -tutkielma	X	10.05.2019	82+4
	Sivuainetutkielma			
	Kandidaatin tutkielma			
	Aineopintojen tutkielma			
Tiivistelmä				
<p>Pro gradu -tutkielma tarkastelee heteronormatiivisuuden esiintymistä Rick Riordanin kolmessa lasten fantasiakirjasarjassa: <i>Percy Jackson</i> (eng. <i>Percy Jackson and the Olympians</i>), <i>Olympoksen sankarit</i> (eng. <i>The Heroes of Olympus</i>) ja <i>Magnus Chase</i> (eng. <i>Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard</i>). Keskittymällä näiden kirjasarjojen kahden hahmon — Nico di Angelo ja Alex Fierro — sukupuoli- ja seksuaali-identiteettiin, tutkielman tavoitteena on tarkastella, miten yhteiskuntamme heteronormatiivisuutta mahdollisesti vahvistetaan tai puretaan Riordanin teoksissa. Tutkielman analyysi perustuu queer-teoriaan, jonka monista lähestymistavoista tutkielmaan valikoituivat hetero- ja homonormatiivisuuden käsitteet sekä Judith Butlerin teoria performatiivisuudesta. Lisäksi analyysin tukena käytetään teoriaa stereotypisoinnista.</p> <p>Tutkielman analyysin ensimmäinen osio keskittyy seksuaali- ja sukupuolivähemmistöjä koskeviin stereotypioihin ja siihen, miten Nico ja Alex näitä stereotypioita toistavat tai vastustavat. Havaintona on, että kumpikin hahmo on pääsääntöisesti ei-stereotyyppinen. Stereotypioiden jälkeen Riordanin teoksia tutkitaan hetero- ja homonormatiivisuuden käsitteiden sekä niihin liittyvien teorioiden, kuten intersektionaalisuuden, pohjalta. Esimerkiksi Nico on kuvattu homonormatiivisella tavalla, sillä hän edustaa vain yhtä vähemmistöryhmää seksuaalisuutensa osalta. Alex puolestaan rikkoo homonormatiivisuutta, sillä hän kuuluu sukupuolivähemmistön lisäksi sekä etniseen että yhteiskuntaluokalliseen vähemmistöön. Analyysin lopuksi tarkastellaan sukupuolen ja kaapissa olemisen performatiivisuutta, jota Riordanin todetaan hyödyntävän heteronormatiivisuuden kritisoimiseksi.</p> <p>Tutkielman johtopäätöksenä on, että vaikka Riordanin teokset joillakin tavoilla vahvistavat heteronormatiivisia näkemyksiä sukupuolesta ja seksuaalisuudesta, pääsääntöisesti ne kuitenkin kritisoivat heteronormatiivisuuden olemassaoloa ja kannustavat sen purkamiseen.</p>				
Avainsanat heteronormatiivisuus, sukupuoli, seksuaalisuus, Rick Riordan, fantasiakirjallisuus, lastenkirjallisuus, queer-teoria, <i>Percy Jackson</i> , <i>Olympoksen sankarit</i> , <i>Magnus Chase</i>				

Faculty Philosophical Faculty		School School of Humanities		
Author Satu Pennanen				
Title A Queer Reading of Rick Riordan's Children's Fantasy Literature				
Main subject	Level	Date	Number of pages	
English Language and Culture	Pro gradu -tutkielma	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	10.05.2019	82+4
	Sivuainetutkielma	<input type="checkbox"/>		
	Kandidaatin tutkielma	<input type="checkbox"/>		
	Aineopintojen tutkielma	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Abstract				
<p>This thesis analyses the presence of heteronormativity in the following three children's fantasy book series by Rick Riordan: <i>Percy Jackson and the Olympians</i>, <i>The Heroes of Olympus</i>, and <i>Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard</i>. By focusing on the gender and sexual identities of two characters from these series — Nico di Angelo and Alex Fierro — the thesis aims to examine how the heteronormativity prevalent in our society is endorsed and challenged in Riordan's work. The novels are analysed from a queer perspective by utilising queer theory and the concept of stereotyping.</p> <p>The first section of the analysis focuses on queer stereotypes and whether they are reproduced or dismantled through Nico and Alex. It is determined that both characters are predominantly non-stereotypical. In the second section of the analysis, Riordan's works are examined by utilising the notions of hetero- and homonormativity in addition to related concepts, such as intersectionality. The results show that Nico, for example, is homonormatively portrayed due to the lack of intersections in his identity whereas Alex disrupts homonormativity by embodying multiple oppressed identities. Lastly, the thesis employs Judith Butler's theory of performativity in order to identify subversive gender performances in the novels and to explore the performative nature of the closet. It is discovered that both Nico and Alex are undoing heteronormative expectations on gender and sexuality.</p> <p>The thesis concludes that while the three book series by Riordan, in some ways, reinforce heteronormative views on gender and sexuality, they primarily criticise the existence and prevalence of heteronormativity in our society and encourage towards its demolition.</p>				
Keywords heteronormativity, gender, sexuality, Rick Riordan, fantasy literature, children's literature, queer theory, <i>Percy Jackson and the Olympians</i> , <i>The Heroes of Olympus</i> , <i>Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard</i>				

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Queerness and Stereotypes	5
2.1. Queer Theory in Literary Criticism	5
2.1.1. Hetero- and Homonormativity.....	7
2.1.2. Performing Gender and Sexuality.....	10
2.2. Stereotypes	13
3. Defining Genre and Discussing Previous Research	20
3.1. Children’s Literature.....	20
3.2. Fantasy Literature.....	22
3.3. Previous Research on Gender and Sexuality in Children’s Literature and Fantasy	25
4. Queer Themes in Riordan’s Work	29
4.1. Stereotypes in Riordan’s Work	29
4.1.1. Looking Queer, Acting Queer	30
4.1.2. Queer Roles, Queer Plots	37
4.1.3. The Coming-Out Narrative.....	43
4.2. Hetero- and Homonormativity in Riordan’s Work.....	50
4.2.1. Compulsory Heterosexuality	50
4.2.2. Intersectionality	55
4.2.3. Queer Time.....	57
4.3. Performativity in Riordan’s Work.....	62
4.3.1. Performing Gender.....	63
4.3.2. Performing the Closet	67
5. Conclusion.....	73
Works Cited.....	77

1. Introduction

Most people enjoy stories in one form or another, whether it is through reading a book or watching a film. Stories are an integral part of the human experience and have been so ever since the humankind developed the ability to speak, and maybe even before that, in the time of cave paintings. Fiction allows us to step into somebody else's shoes, and in so doing, increases our empathy and widens our world view. Stories also present us with characters we can identify with, which sometimes validates our own life experiences and identity. For children and adolescents especially, fiction is an important way of constructing one's sense of self as they are trying to find their place in the world. Finding a character who represents one's identity can be an invigorating experience, particularly if one belongs to a marginalised group. This is why it is essential to offer children stories with characters of different ethnicities, sexualities, gender identities and so forth, and luckily, there are authors who are not afraid to include them in their work. One such author is Rick Riordan, whose works I will study from a queer perspective in this thesis.

Rick Riordan is an American author known for his children's and young adult fantasy fiction. He has written multiple book series inspired by different mythologies. His most notable work is *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, a five-book series which tells the story of Percy Jackson who discovers that Greek gods are not simply a myth but very much alive in modern-day America, and that he himself is a demigod, that is, a child of a mortal and a godly parent. The series is told as Percy's first-person narrative while he and his friends try to find a way to stop the titan Kronos from returning back to life and destroying the world. Percy is a white, heterosexual male, and as such, represents the majority of protagonists in literature. However, he is also dyslexic and has ADHD, which are traits that most demigods share, and thus he is also a role model for the marginalised children with these attributes. The dyslexia is caused by his brain being attuned to Ancient Greek and it is because of, not

despite of, ADHD that Percy is an incredible fighter — his overactive brain is capable of noticing multiple signals even in the heat of battle.

Riordan returns to the world of Percy Jackson in *The Heroes of Olympus* series, consisting of five novels, where he switches to the third-person narrative and tells the story from multiple points of view. The reader is introduced to a crew of new characters of various different backgrounds as both Greek and Roman demigods unite to stop Gaia, the Mother Earth, from awakening. There are, for example, Piper McLean, whose father is a famous Native American actor, and Leo Valdez, a Latino boy with a painful past of foster homes. Many familiar characters also make a reappearance, with Percy and Annabeth Chase, as well as Nico di Angelo in *The Blood of Olympus* (hereafter abbreviated *BoO*), having their own points of view in the novels.

In addition to Greek — and by extension, Roman — mythology, Riordan has written a trilogy on Norse mythology, *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard*. There Riordan returns to the first-person narrative with Magnus Chase, a homeless teenager who dies and is brought to Valhalla, an after-life home for warriors in service of Odin. The story continues to tell how Magnus and his friends have to prevent Ragnarok, which would mean the end of the world. Once again, Riordan has included a diverse cast of characters in his work. For example, Samirah al-Abbas is a Muslim girl working as one of the Valkyrie, who bring people to Valhalla, and Hearthstone is a mute and deaf elf who uses sign language to communicate.

This thesis is a contribution to the fairly limited scope of research conducted on Riordan's work, despite him being a popular author of children's literature — as of 28 April 2019, the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series has spent 500 weeks on *The New York Times* Best Seller list for children's book series ("Children's Series"). Previous studies have focused, for example, on the themes of environmentalism, allegory, and death in

Riordan's children's novels (see Doughty; Stelle; Glasner). This thesis presents a new point of view to the existing research on Riordan's work by analysing the three afore-mentioned book series by Rick Riordan from the perspective of how they represent people who belong to a sexual minority or who do not fit in the gender dichotomy between male and female. This will be achieved by concentrating on two characters from the diverse cast: Nico di Angelo and Alex Fierro.

Nico is a gay character who makes his first appearance in *The Titan's Curse* (hereafter abbreviated *TTC*), the third novel in the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series. His homosexuality, however, is not revealed until *The House of Hades* (hereafter abbreviated *HoH*), which is the fourth instalment in *The Heroes of Olympus* series. Alex, in turn, is a character who is introduced to the reader in *The Hammer of Thor* (hereafter abbreviated *HoT*), the second novel in the *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* series. Alex is gender fluid, which means that Alex identifies as either male or female, depending on the moment. When referring to Alex, the other characters use either the pronoun 'he' or 'she', according to which Alex has asked them to use in the situation. To avoid misgendering the character, I would use the pronouns 'they' and 'them' if not for Alex's straightforward refusal to be called by them in *The Hammer of Thor* (272–273). However, Alex states in the novel that “[m]ost of the time, I identify as female, but sometimes I have very *male* days” (272; emphasis original). Therefore, the character will be referred to by pronouns 'she' and 'her', except when discussing scenes where Alex identifies as male.

By concentrating on the sexual and gender identities of these two characters, the thesis aims to demonstrate that the inclusion of queer characters and the way in which they are written in the novels both challenge and uphold the heteronormativity prevalent in our society today. This will be accomplished by looking for possible stereotypical portrayals of queer people, for ways in which the characters disrupt or support homonormativity, and

for signs of non-normative performances of sexuality and gender. The main theoretical framework used in the thesis is queer theory, which will be defined in the next section along with the concept of stereotyping. The section following the theoretical framework concentrates on discussing gender and sexuality in the genres of children's literature and fantasy fiction. Previous research on the subject will also be presented. In the analysis section, Riordan's work will be examined through the concepts of stereotypes, hetero- and homonormativity, as well as performativity. Lastly, there will be a conclusion on the findings presented in the thesis.

2. Queerness and Stereotypes

In this chapter, the theoretical framework of the analysis will be presented. The chapter starts with a brief overlook of queer theory and how it is implemented in queer literary criticism. This section is followed by definitions of hetero- and homonormativity as well as gender performativity, which are central concepts in queer theory. Lastly, it will be discussed what stereotypes are and what kind of stereotypes exist for gay men and transgender people. In each section, I will explain why that particular concept is relevant for the aims of this thesis.

2.1. Queer Theory in Literary Criticism

Queer theory is a branch of research that is particularly concerned with questions of gender and sexuality. Its roots are in feminism and gay/lesbian studies, which started to challenge the humanist notion of an essential self, according to which attributes such as gender and sexuality are immutable characteristics of a person (Klages 111–112). While feminism and gay/lesbian studies examine issues related to gender and sexuality, respectively, queer theory combines these issues and expands on them. It questions “the binary structures by which sex, gender and sexuality are conventionally understood, whereby all human persons are required to identify/be identified as either male or female, either masculine or feminine and either heterosexual or homosexual” (Carroll 6) and as such, one of its main objects of critique is the heteronormativity of society which enforces these binaries. Heteronormativity and its counterpart homonormativity will be defined and discussed in a later section, followed by a section on Butler’s theory of performativity. Firstly, however, I will examine how queer theory is utilised in literary criticism.

When it comes to applying queer theory to literary analysis, there is no one right way to do it. In *Literary Theory: A Guide to the Perplexed*, Mary Klages lists how gay/lesbian literary criticism examines literature, and it can be argued that these strategies

are also implemented by queer theory, but with a focus on a wider scope of images of sexuality and gender than just homosexuality. These strategies include, but are not limited to,

finding gay/lesbian authors whose sexuality has been marked or erased in history and biography; [...] looking at texts by gay/lesbian authors to discover particular literary themes, techniques, and perspectives which come from being a homosexual in a heterosexual world; [...] looking at texts – by gay or straight authors – which depict homosexuality and heterosexuality, or which focus on sexuality as a constructed (rather than essential) concept; and [...] looking at how literary texts (by gay or straight authors) operate in conjunction with non-literary texts to provide a culture with ways to think about sexuality. (Klages 116)

The practice of trying to determine whether an author belongs to a marginalised sexual and/or gender identity is popular within queer literary criticism, and it also often extends to analysing characters' gender and sexuality. Robert Dale Parker, in *How to Interpret Literature*, criticises this approach of outing — exposing a closeted identity — of authors and characters, since its popularity has led people to believe that it is the main objective of queer literary criticism (177). Furthermore, simply outing authors and characters as queer often reinforces rather than subverts the supposed binary of sexuality and gender because it “invites the assumption that all the rest are straight, as if everyone were straight unless otherwise noted” (Parker 177), which opposes queer theory's goal of challenging the binaries of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual. Outing can also reduce the queer subjects to their sexualities, which straight authors and characters are rarely subjected to (Parker 177). As Parker argues, “[q]ueer criticism is about the cultural logics of queerness and

heterocentrism, not about outing or pinpointing the supposed sexual orientation of writers or characters” (185).

Since both of the characters analysed in this thesis are revealed to be queer in the source texts — Nico is forcibly outed in *The House of Hades* and Alex declares her queerness in the first scene she is present in *The Hammer of Thor* — the aim of the analysis is not to out them. Rather, the strategy implemented to analyse Riordan’s novels will be the third one in Mary Klages’s list of ways to look at literature from a gay/lesbian — or in this case, queer — perspective: examining how they depict queerness. This poses the risk of reducing the characters to their gender and sexuality, as noted by Parker, but until queer characters become more common in literature and their depictions more varied, it will be difficult not to focus on the queerness of the non-straight characters and how it is presented, since the general assumption still is that “everyone is heterosexual unless labeled otherwise” (Parker 163). However, rather than simply analysing the way Nico and Alex are queer, I hope to reveal how heteronormativity is present in the novels and whether the two characters challenge it or uphold it by conforming to homonormativity. These two concepts — hetero- and homonormativity — will be defined in the following section.

2.1.1. Hetero- and Homonormativity

As mentioned above, one of the main objects of criticism in queer theory is the heteronormativity prevalent in our society. Consequently, defining heteronormativity is the first aim of this section, accompanied by definitions of the concepts of intersectionality and compulsory heterosexuality. I will also discuss the notion of homonormativity and the negative consequences of both hetero- and homonormativity.

Heteronormativity has been defined by Cathy J. Cohen as “both those localised practices and those centralised institutions which legitimise and privilege heterosexuality

and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and ‘natural’ within society” (qtd. in Carroll 7), thus forcing deviance on sexualities and gender identities that differ from the norm. However, not all non-normative sexual and gender presentations are equally oppressed; race and class, for example, also have to be factored in when considering heteronormativity. This creates an intersection of multiple forms of oppression where white lesbians, for example, certainly face prejudice, and yet they are far more privileged than black lesbians whose race subjects them to another form of oppression in addition to their gender and sexuality. Intersectionality, then, is “a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience” (Collins and Bilge 2) by exploring the interlocking of varied forms of oppression people with multiple minority identities face. It is a useful tool in examining heteronormativity.

The problem and danger with heteronormativity is that it is not simply a separate aspect of our society. As Berlant and Warner have noted,

[h]eteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture. (qtd. in Carroll 7)

The pervasiveness of heteronormativity has resulted in compulsory heterosexuality where everyone is expected to be straight and conform to the gender roles linked to one’s assigned sex, effectively rendering queer people abnormal (Parker 165). The effects of compulsory heterosexuality can be seen in fairly harmless situations such as casual conversation when men are asked if they have a girlfriend and vice versa, the one who poses the question not considering that the other person might identify as something other than heterosexual, but it also has more serious consequences such as a high number of suicides among queer youth

(Parker 164). This is why dismantling heteronormativity is crucial; it can considerably reduce the suffering experienced by people of non-normative identities.

Heteronormativity can be challenged by increasing the visibility of queer people, since that will demolish the status of heterosexuality as the norm. In literature, this means including characters that represent people with differing sexual and gender identities. It is important to note, however, that authors should be mindful of the kinds of queer characters they write because even with good intentions for inclusion, rather than disrupting heteronormativity, they might actually reinforce it through characters who conform to homonormativity.

Homonormativity is defined by Duggan as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (qtd. in Lester 247). The heteronormative institutions and expectations that homonormative subjects endorse include “maintaining traditionally appropriate gender presentation, engaging in exclusively monogamous lifestyles, and raising children in nuclear families” (Lester 247). Furthermore, homonormativity ignores intersectionality by excluding characters who could face oppression due to other features than their sexuality, such as race/ethnicity, class, religion and disability. The prominence of homonormativity in children’s literature, for example, renders queer experiences other than the white, upper middle class, able-bodied and often Christian one (Epstein 189) invisible, which is “politically paralyzing and ultimately dangerous” (Lester 247).

In this thesis, it will be examined whether the characters of Nico di Angelo and Alex Fierro challenge heteronormativity or whether they sustain it by conforming to homonormativity. This will be accomplished by investigating whether Nico and Alex

represent multiple forms of marginalised identities and whether their life trajectories challenge heteronormative ones.

2.1.2. Performing Gender and Sexuality

In this section, I will first discuss the concepts of sex, gender and sexuality. The way in which they are heteronormatively regarded will also be examined. I will then present Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which is an alternative view on how gender and sexual identities are formed.

People are traditionally divided into two fundamentally different groups: male and female. The group one belongs to is determined at the latest at birth when a baby's sex is identified based on their genitalia, and according to heteronormativity, the biological sex also determines one's social gender; a baby of the male sex will grow to identify with the male gender and abide by the gender roles set upon him by society. However, the experiences of genderqueer people show the invalidity of this assumption; an individual of one sex may identify with the opposite gender or they may not fit into the male-female binary at all, instead identifying as something in between or completely outside of the dichotomy. Yet, despite the evidence that gender is not as rigid as formerly believed, the heteronormative way of categorising sex and gender as either male or female is deeply ingrained in our society, and people who challenge this order are oppressed by the ones who conform to social norms.

Sexuality is intrinsically linked with gender. Whether our sexuality is decreed by our gender, or our gender is the product of our sexuality, or our "gender and sexuality [are] interwoven, so that our gender identities are shaped by our sexual orientation and vice versa" (Monro 11) is debatable, but what is certain is that how we categorise sexual orientation changes when people do not fit into the binary system of sex and gender. After

all, as Monro explains, the sexual orientations we typically recognise — hetero-, homo- and bisexuality — are “based on the gender binary system” (14). When defining these categories, the sex of the other person is essential, since “being heterosexual means being attracted to people of the opposite sex, whereas being gay or lesbian entails same-sex attraction” (Monro 14). Bisexuality differs from this monosexual attraction, as a bisexual person may be interested in either men or women, but nevertheless, it still does not account for people outside of the gender binary (Monro 14). There are new sexual orientation categories developed by members of the LGBTQ community, such as pansexuality where the sex or gender identity of the partner is irrelevant, but these terms have yet to be officially recognised.

In order to oppose viewing gender and sexuality as biologically determined qualities, Judith Butler, who has been proclaimed as the founder of queer theory (Gauntlett 145), has envisioned an alternative way to perceive them. Butler argues that instead of being determined biologically, gender is socially constructed through actions, a kind of performance (Sullivan 82). In her revolutionary book *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (33). In other words, instead of there being a gender identity that decrees our actions through which our identity is expressed, it is our actions that construct our identity. However, since gender is a social construction, it ultimately follows social norms that have been established by continuous performativity. Therefore, wearing make-up, for example, constructs a female identity because it has been founded as a feminine act through repetitive usage for shaping an identity that is seen as female.

The repetition of performances that “maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” has rendered them “intelligible”

(Butler, *Gender Trouble* 23), meaning that the performer's gender and/or sexual identity can be recognised and understood by others. These performances are those that conform to heteronormative gender roles and expectations. Failing to perform an identity that follows the heteronormative expectations or that others are able to recognise, can, as Butler claims in *Undoing Gender*, “undo one's personhood” (1). What she means by this is that either one is read as not fitting the cultural norms of society, which can lead to the undoing of one's personhood through discrimination and even violence, or one's performance is read incorrectly and thus their personhood is undone. An example of the latter could be a situation where a transman is referred to by the pronouns ‘she’ and ‘her’, which denies him recognition as a man.

In order to disrupt the heteronormative categories of gender and sexuality, we need to, according to Butler,

make gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity. (*Gender Trouble*, 44)

This means that deconstructing heteronormativity occurs through everyday gender performances that are unpredictable and do not succumb to normative ideas of gender and sexuality, thus challenging them (Gauntlett 152). Butler seems to encourage the reader to consider their own gender performances and whether they could subvert heteronormativity through them. After all, “[t]he task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, *to displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself” (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 189; emphasis original).

The theory of performativity can be utilised when identifying ways of disturbing heteronormativity. David Gauntlett raises Madonna as an example who, with her

“blurring and confusion of genders, fluidity of sexuality, transgression of masculine and feminine stereotypes” (154), demonstrated in the 1990s how gender can be subversively repeated. When it comes to literary criticism, Kerry Mallan, for example, has employed the concept of undoing in her article “(Un)doing Gender” in order to discover how gender is both done and undone in selected children’s novels, and whether the texts uphold or challenge heteronormative beliefs on gender (23). Sanna Lehtonen is also a scholar who has used Butler’s theory of performativity, but she extends it to include class as well as gender in her analysis of Susan Price’s *Odin Trilogy*. She examines the ways in which class and gender are performatively constructed in the trilogy and shows how the novels support the idea that the constraints of society can undo one’s personhood and that battling against them can be a risk.

In this thesis, Butler’s theory of performativity will be used to analyse the ways in which both Nico di Angelo and Alex Fierro perform their gender and/or sexual identities. It will also be examined how others read their performances and whether their personhoods are undone through illegibility or whether the performances undo heteronormative views on gender and sexuality. After all, Nico is gay, thus disrupting the coherence between gender and desire, whereas Alex’s gender fluidity rattles the notion that one’s gender is in keeping with one’s sex. Both of them, therefore, could be seen as undoing gender in their own way.

2.2. Stereotypes

In this section, I will present ways in which queer people are stereotypically portrayed. First, however, it is necessary to define the concept of stereotyping and discuss why it can be harmful. I will also explore why stereotypes are commonly used in different forms of entertainment.

Stereotyping is the practice of reducing “people to a few, simple essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature” (Hall 247). It is a different process from ‘typing’ which is an essential part of our making sense of the world. By typing we refer “objects, people or events in our heads to the general classificatory schemes into which – according to our culture – they fit” (Hall 247). For example, when getting to know a person, we classify them according to their social role (a parent, a teacher, a child), their belonging to different groups (what is the person’s gender, ethnicity, class?) or their personality type (e.g. happy, introverted, forgetful) (Hall 247). We construct our understanding of an individual on these characteristics, creating a type. As Dyer explains, a type is “any simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characterization in which a few traits are foregrounded and change or ‘development’ is kept to a minimum” (qtd. in Hall 247). Stereotypes, in turn, take the characteristics assigned to a person and “*reduce* everything about the person to those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them” (Hall 247; emphasis original). Stereotypes are then extended to represent a whole group of people. Thus, some people may claim that all gay men are effeminate or every fat person is lazy.

As straightforward as stereotypes may seem, they, in fact, conceal a complex set of attitudes behind their simplicity, as observed by T. E. Perkins:

[T]o refer ‘correctly’ to someone as a ‘dumb blonde’, and to understand what is meant by that, implies a great deal more than hair colour and intelligence. It refers immediately to *her* sex, which refers to her status in society, her relationship to men, her inability to behave or think rationally, and so on. In short, it implies knowledge of a complex social structure. (qtd. in Dyer 13; emphasis original)

The same happens when assigning stereotypes to queer people. For example, stereotyping gay men as effeminate is a more complex issue than them having a few feminine

characteristics. It evokes attitudes connected to women and their status in society. For example, since women are seen as the weaker sex, reducing gay men to effeminacy connects them with weakness as well. Furthermore, the stereotype of feminine gay men enforces the trope of inversion, which is a model used to explain same-sex desire. According to this view, homosexuality is caused by the physical body being inhabited by a self of a different gender. In other words, there is “‘a woman’s soul trapped in a man’s body’ – and vice versa” (Sedgwick 87). Thus, calling a man who acts in a feminine way ‘gay’ implies more than just sexuality.

Stereotypes are generally negative because they reduce a person to a few, simplified characteristics which are often unfavourable. If one stereotypes another person, they fail to see the complexity of their character. What is more, we might think that a stereotype is created on the basis of what we know about certain members of society, but often it is the stereotype on which we construct our knowledge of a group (Dyer 14). This relates to the power dynamics in a society because usually the stereotypes are imposed on a group rather than them creating the stereotypes themselves. As Dyer writes, “[w]ho proposes the stereotype, who has the power to enforce it, is the crux of the matter” (14).

Since many people are already familiar with different stereotypes, they are often used in films, books, and other types of entertainment to avoid having to create novel personalities. Moreover, stereotypes enable the audience to construct fairly similar views about a character because they “invoke a consensus” (Dyer 14). If a screenwriter wants to include a gay male character, for example, in a film without stating his sexuality explicitly, they can write him in an effeminate way because then the majority of the audience will identify him as gay based on the stereotype that gay men are somehow feminine. However, representing marginalised groups only through stereotypes is problematic because reading, for example, is “part of the process of learning to be, of writing the self, as it were, into its

social roles” (Robbins 15). If queer children can only find their sexuality or gender identity represented in a certain way, they might start to think that is how they also have to be in order to be accepted. This point is further argued by Lasse Kekki who writes that “[i]f the possibility of variation is marginalized from the construction of lesbian and gay [or queer] identity, it may lead to an imitation of the available oppressive, suffocating stereotypes” (48). Therefore, it is important that marginalised groups, in particular, are represented in the media in meaningful ways, not just as stereotypes.

In order to analyse the characters of Nico di Angelo and Alex Fierro and how they challenge or conform to stereotypes, it is necessary to consider what kinds of stereotypes there exist for queer people. That will be the focus in the following paragraphs. I will discuss the stereotypical portrayals of both gay men and transgender people as well as the general trends of stereotyping queer people in fiction.

As noted by B.J. Epstein, when queer characters are included in fiction, their portrayals often revolve around their queerness; it is their defining characteristic rather than being a trait among many others that form a complex entity (63). Their looks and the way they act reinforce the stereotypes associated with their non-normative sexual or gender identity. Furthermore, queer characters are often restricted to one type of storyline, which is the coming-out narrative. While coming out is generally an important part of queer people’s lives, it is harmful when fiction portrays it as the main challenge they face, particularly when it is often depicted as a negative occurrence (Epstein 74–75).

Negativity and unhappiness are common features in the lives of queer characters in literature. In *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, Cart and Jenkins analyse portrayals of homosexual characters in young adult fiction, and they mark that early works with gay content in particular include a number of homosexual characters who “are pictured as unfortunates doomed to either a premature death or a life of despair lived at the darkest

margins of society” (xvi). Their focus is on gay and lesbian characters, but characters with other queer identities suffer similar fates as well. For example, transgender characters are stereotypically “freaks or dysfunctional and confused” as well as “lonely, ostracized, and punished (raped, murdered) for their transgression against the gender system” (Siebler 321). B.J. Epstein discusses the portrayals of queer characters in more recent novels, but her findings are not encouraging, either. Children’s literature and young adult fiction still often suggest that queerness is a problem and that “being queer means having a traumatic, anxiety-ridden life that can include rejection by one’s friends and relatives” (Epstein 130).

In regards to specific stereotypes of different queer identities, B.J. Epstein argues there are three main ones for gay men that can be found in young adult literature: the butch athlete, the camp queer, and the feminine male (112). The athlete is a masculine gay man who can hide his sexuality behind his socially-accepted maleness (Epstein 111). While this stereotype seemingly challenges the common assumption that gay men are feminine, the shock with which other characters usually react to the gay athlete coming out only emphasises how foreign the idea of a traditionally masculine man being gay is.

The camp queer and the feminine male are the more common stereotypes of gay men since their outward appearance and behaviour allow them to be more easily recognisable as “gay”. Out of the two, the camp queer is the more stereotypically gay one, with attributes such as “limp wrists, swishing walks, using a female name or referring to oneself as ‘she’, witty jokes, and catty behaviour” (Epstein 110–111). The feminine male is not as blatantly homosexual as the camp queer; rather than being stereotypically gay, he is stereotypically feminine. This means having characteristics and roles that are traditionally linked with being female, such as being emotionally sensitive and dependent on the more masculine, stronger type. Both the camp queer and the feminine male often embody many of the stereotypical characteristics attached to gay men, as listed by Angela Simon:

Gay men are stereotyped to be interested in sex, to be emotional, to have a need for security, to be neat, to enjoy art and music, to be significantly different from the “normal, healthy adult,” to be positive toward males, to be feminine, to have high-pitched voices, to wear jewelry, to be creative, and to be complicated. (n.p.)

The prevalence of gay characters with these attributes in literature meant for children and young adults is problematic because it promotes the idea that to be gay means to be a certain way when, in truth, there are as many ways to be gay as there are to be straight.

Transgender characters also suffer from stereotypical portrayals. In her article “Transqueer Representations and How We Educate”, Kay Siebler discusses at length how transgender people — or transqueer, a term Siebler uses — are represented in popular media. Her focus is on films and television programmes, but her findings can be applied to literature as well.

The most common way of representing transgender people is to have them undergo surgical treatment in order to have their physical body match their experienced gender (Siebler 338). Siebler argues that in today’s media, transgender people are portrayed as either “pre-operative” or “post-operative” (328) and that there is no room for transgender people who are happy in their body and gender without surgery (324). An example of a television programme that perpetuates this idea of a mandatory sex transformation is *Transgeneration*, in which all four of the transgender youth are in the process of transitioning (Siebler 323). The overwhelming prevalence of representing transgender people in states of transitioning is harmful because it enforces the gender/sex binary (Siebler 338) in addition to erasing the possibility of other ways of being a transgender person (Siebler 328).

Siebler also discusses how the representations of transgender people accentuate the importance of clothing for them, and how clothes are used to enforce the

gender binary of male/female (323). After all, clothing “can be seen as a barrier between bodies and the rest of the world” (Stewart qtd. in Siebler 323), hiding the physical form of the transgender person, and allowing them to conform to the gender norms of surrounding society. Thus, in often-repeated stereotypical portrayals, a transman, for example, dresses in men’s clothes and binds his breasts in order to pass as female rather than disrupts the norm of what a man is supposed to look like.

When discussing stereotypes, it is important to remember that including queer characters with stereotypical characteristics is not always necessarily bad. After all, the stereotypes usually stem from reality. For example, there are gay men who act in a very feminine way and enjoy fashion and many transgender people want to undergo surgical treatment. However, it is problematic when the vast majority of queer characters in literature are stereotypical, particularly when heterosexual characters are allowed to have complex personalities and their stories are not restricted to one type of narrative. There is grave need for more varied portrayals of queer characters in children’s fiction, and in this thesis, it will be examined whether Nico di Angelo and Alex Fierro fulfil that need or whether they are another set of characters plagued by queer stereotypes.

To conclude, this chapter has presented the theoretical framework of the thesis. Since the focus of the thesis is on gender and sexuality, queer theory offers the best tools for approaching the matter. Queer theory is a multifaceted branch of research that examines themes of gender and sexuality in a variety of contexts. In this thesis, Rick Riordan’s work will be analysed through queer theory’s concepts of hetero- and homonormativity as well as the performativity of gender and sexuality. While stereotyping is not an exclusively queer concept, it will also be utilised in the analysis of Nico di Angelo and Alex Fierro.

3. Defining Genre and Discussing Previous Research

In this chapter, the genres of children's literature and fantasy fiction will be defined. Their potential for subverting heteronormativity will also be discussed. In the last section, existing research on the subject of gender and sexuality in children's literature and fantasy fiction will be presented.

3.1. Children's Literature

The aim of this section is, firstly, to define the genre of children's literature. Secondly, it will examine why the inclusion of queer theme's in the genre is important. Thirdly, the heterosexualisation of children and how it affects the reception of queer-themed children's literature will be discussed.

Children's literature, at its simplest, is literature "written with children as its main audience" (Gopalakrishnan 4), and yet categorising books into children's literature is seldom quite so straightforward as there are texts like the *Harry Potter* series which may have originally been written primarily for children but which have gained a significant number of readers from other age groups as well. Furthermore, there are books which were not initially considered as children's literature, but could be categorised thus now. Gopalakrishnan illustrates this point with *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which was not originally targeted toward children although the protagonist of the novel is an 8-year-old child and the story is told from her perspective (4–5). Moreover, children's literature has changed dramatically over time as perceptions of childhood have changed. How we view children today is different from the way they were regarded in the 18th century, and that is reflected in the literature written for them (Gopalakrishnan 5–6).

Childhood is usually seen as a positive time in one's life because one is still free from most adult responsibilities. However, it is also a period of uncertainty during which

one tries to construct one's identity and find one's place in the world. It can be a scary process, especially if a child realises that the person they are becoming does not fit the norms of the surrounding society. They might feel that they do not identify with the gender their sex determines or they might identify as gay or bisexual. Fiction is not perhaps the most obvious way to help children of minority groups to accept themselves, but as Kerry Mallan notes, "[c]hildren's literature provides a field of narrative knowledge whereby readers gain impressions of childhood and adolescence, or more specifically, knowledge of ways of being at a time in life, which is marked by uncertainty" (12). If a child can see their way of being represented in a positive way, even if it is only in literature, it validates their identity. Even children who fit the heteronormative norms of our society gain from reading about characters of marginalised groups because children's literature "is crucially implicated in shaping the values, attitudes and behaviours of children and young people" (Mallan 12). Exposing children to different sexualities and gender identities at a young age is a means of disrupting heteronormativity, since they are shown other ways of being than the heteronormatively accepted one.

When it comes to children's literature, there is a noticeable imbalance as the books are written by adults for a much younger audience. Some critics have even argued that "children's literature perpetuates adult fantasies about childhood purity rather than reflecting the desires, characteristics or interests of actual children" (Ní Bhroin and Kennon 1), which would not allow children to truly connect with the texts they read. This is, however, a fairly extremist view. Most critics nowadays acknowledge the gap between the adult author and the child reader, but do not view it as a blatantly bad thing. After all, even a young person has power in the reading process and how they interpret a story (Ní Bhroin and Kennon 1). However, writing children's literature is always "a political act" (Hollindale qtd. in Ní Bhroin and Kennon 2) because it is the author who decides which themes and topics are

appropriate for children and which values to present to children through these themes. It is the author's choice whether to conform to or challenge heteronormativity in their writing, and whether to include characters that represent people from all walks of life.

The inclusion of characters of differing sexual and gender identities in children's literature can be greeted with harsh criticism because topics even remotely relating to sexuality are generally regarded as unsuitable for children who are thought to be too young for such matters, or even asexual, for which reason the topic of sexuality is a taboo (Robinson and Jones Díaz 141). The supposed asexuality and the young age of children do not prevent the presence of heteronormativity, and thus, heterosexuality, in all aspects of their lives, however. This can be perceived in how children play family with toys or each other, incorporating traditional gender roles and heterosexuality through the roles of a mother and a father, for example. Furthermore, Robinson and Jones Díaz note that "[t]he media, popular culture and children's literature play a major role in the perpetuation of heteronormativity in children's everyday lives" (142). Due to the pervasive nature of heteronormativity, the heterosexualisation of children is invisible until there are transgressions against the norm (Robinson and Jones Díaz 141–142). Becoming aware of heteronormativity and its consequences is the first step in dismantling it, and therefore there is a need for a larger amount of children's literature, for example, that includes characters that challenge the norms of society.

3.2. Fantasy Literature

This section starts with an attempt to define the genre of fantasy literature. The definition will be followed by a discussion on the political nature of the fantasy genre and the ways in which it can both perpetuate and challenge heteronormativity. I will also consider why

children's fantasy fiction may be more effective in disrupting heteronormativity than realistic children's literature.

It is difficult to determine what exactly constitutes fantasy literature because the works considered as fantasy are so diverse and different that fantasy as a genre seems to defy definition. There are a few characteristics that most scholars agree on, such as fantasy being about the "construction of the impossible" (James and Mendlesohn 1), but when it comes to more specific attributes, the definitions can be drastically different. James and Mendlesohn fittingly describe fantasy as "a row of terraced houses [... with] shared walls, and a certain level of consensus around the basic bricks, but the internal décor can differ wildly" (1). This view somewhat reflects Brian Attebery's concept of fantasy as a "fuzzy set" (13) where the genre is seen as a group of texts that share some common tropes. The texts in the centre include many of the features commonly linked with fantasy, and one of the most central texts in Attebery's view is J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In fact, according to Attebery, fantasy genre can be distinguished by "the set of texts that in some way or other resemble [the trilogy]" (14). The texts that share fewer tropes with *The Lord of the Rings* and other core texts are thereby situated on the edges of the fuzzy set and start blending with other genres, such as science fiction.

Much like children's literature, fantasy fiction is always political. Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint argue that "a fantasy text at the very least functions like any cultural text to reproduce dominant ideology" (102), meaning that if nothing else, fantasy is conservative, enforcing the norms of the surrounding society. In fact, despite being the literature of the impossible, fantasy has traditionally been seen as a fairly conservative genre due to its strong tradition of medieval fantasy — thanks to the success of *The Lord of the Rings* — which often reproduces the rigid gender roles of the patriarchal society of the Middle Ages, and to some extent, of today as well. However, it is important to remember that "[l]ike any other

text, a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context. Though it might struggle against the limits of this context, often being articulated upon that very struggle, it cannot be understood in isolation from it” (R. Jackson 3). Older fantasy texts may be conservative in today’s society but might have been transformative at the time of their publication. As the novels analysed in this thesis have all been written in the 21st century — the most recent one, *The Ship of the Dead* (hereafter abbreviated *SotD*), was published on 3 October 2017 — they will be compared to the norms of current Western culture.

Although fantasy fiction can be conservative, that is not to say it cannot challenge the order of things. The name of Rosemary Jackson’s book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* by itself suggests that fantasy fiction is capable of subverting the power structures of surrounding society. In her book, Jackson explains that fantasy “characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence or loss” (3). According to her view, fantasy resists the dominant social order by making the invisible visible and by discovering absence (4). This is precisely what Rick Riordan does in his fantasy novels; he gives marginalised groups visibility by writing characters that represent them, thus working to dismantle heteronormativity.

José Monleón, however, argues against fantasy’s power of subversion by stating that “the exposition of the repressed is not necessarily a subversive act, if by subversion is meant a challenge to the causes of repression, a defiance of order, an assault on dominant ideology” (14). In that sense, Riordan’s works do not try to overthrow the dominant social order because the stories take place in modern-day America and the characters do not necessarily fight against the norms of society as they are busy with trying to save the world. That does not, however, undermine the importance of representing people that do not conform to heteronormativity in fantasy literature, especially for fantasy targeted

toward children. Of course, one can find characters belonging to minority groups in realistic children's fiction as well, but as Maria Nikolajeva claims, "fantasy can empower a child protagonist in a way that realistic prose is incapable of doing" (61), by giving them magical powers, for example. In Nikolajeva's view, this is enough to give fantasy "a huge subversive potential as it can interrogate the existing power relationships [...] without necessarily shattering the real order of the world" (61). Riordan's novels may not be a direct "assault on dominant ideology" (Monleón 14), but they can make their young readers ponder on the issues of sexual and gender politics.

3.3. Previous Research on Gender and Sexuality in Children's Literature and Fantasy

In *Are the Kids All Right?*, B.J. Epstein states that "though recent years have seen an increase in research into both children's literature and queer studies, there has been little overlap of this research" (2), which was also my experience while doing background research for this thesis. Even more difficult was to locate research that would combine queer theory, children's literature and fantasy fiction. Epstein, for example, limits her research to realistic children's books because she feels they "more clearly represent society's views about young people and sexuality" (21). In fact, at the time of writing this thesis, there seems to be no exhaustive study on sexuality and gender in children's fantasy fiction. Anne Balay's article almost fulfils all three categories, but her focus is on young adult fantasy rather than children's fantasy. Furthermore, her analysis only encompasses three fantasy series, which leaves room for more extensive research. This implies that there is need for research that investigates children's fantasy fiction from a queer perspective, particularly as fantasy should be a genre where anything is possible, and yet it often follows the heteronormative traditions of the surrounding society, as discussed above. However, despite the lack of studies on queerness in children's fantasy fiction, in the following paragraphs I will present

what has been discovered about gender and sexuality in children's literature and fantasy fiction separately.

In her study of a total of sixty books with LGBTQ themes — twenty picture books, eight middle-grade books and thirty-two young adult books — Epstein examines the ways in which queer people are portrayed in these works, what kind of messages are presented through these depictions, and whether the representations of queer people disrupt or reinforce normative notions of gender and sexuality (1). She argues that many of the texts can be regarded as issue books where being queer is seen as an issue, that the portrayals of LGBTQ characters are often stereotypical, and that they do not allow for multiple simultaneous identity categories, such as gay and African American. Epstein's view is that while the proliferation of children's books with queer themes is positive, there is a profound need for authors to write novels with more varied representations of LGBTQ people (245).

Similarly to Epstein, Jasmine Lester declares in her study of sixty-eight children's books that "the representation of queer identities in children's literature upholds more than challenges heteronormativity" (245). Her focus is on examining how the books convey homonormativity by upholding normative views on family and gender and by supporting white supremacy through the exclusion of queer characters who represent "queer people who are of color, non-binary gender identities, and lower-class statuses" (Lester 259) as well as other marginalised identities. Lester calls for more inclusive children's literature because "as a vehicle of cultural communication that can inform foundational aspects of children's belief systems, [children's literature] can help combat dangerous discourse by instilling at a young age ideas of social justice and equity for all people" (262).

The focus of Jill Hermann-Wilmarth and Caitlin Ryan's study is the representation of queer characters in middle-grade books which are intended for readers aged 8–11 and which have been studied very little in relation to queer themes (847). The preteens

are also the target audience of Rick Riordan's children's books. Herman-Wilmarth and Ryan's findings mirror those of Lester and Epstein; the texts they analyse add "to what could be considered a homonormative picture of queer communities" (847). In addition to examining the LGBTQ characters in the works, they offer an example of how to read them through a queer lens which can "help disrupt normative representations of a range of identity categories whether or not characters are LGBT-identified" (847). This is accomplished by investigating how families can be formed in non-normative ways, for example.

Anne Balay discusses the role of queerness in young adult fantasy fiction in her study. Through the analysis of three young adult fantasy book series that include gay characters, she finds that fantasy tends to depict queer characters in a way that makes them seem less threatening and, thereby, more homonormative. The relationships in these novels between the gay characters are desexualised, and emphasise love, secrecy and bonding for life (Balay 932). However, despite the apparent homonormativity, Balay argues that "[t]he deliberate, exaggerated, parodic attitudes these texts take towards the regulation of queer sexuality make the overarching regulation of sexuality visible and therefore escapable through narrative, humor, or fantasy" (937). Fantasy as a genre may have rigid rules on sex and sexuality, but when there are rules, there are also opportunities for rule violation, which allows for queer readings (Balay 924).

As the studies discussed above show, children's literature and fantasy fiction often perpetuate heteronormative views on gender and sexuality even when they include queer characters. However, there is need for more research because the number of queer-themed children's and fantasy books is on the rise, as is their overlap, though more slowly. Studies on children's fantasy fiction that includes queer characters are particularly scarce, and this thesis aims to fill the void by concentrating on Rick Riordan's novels that can be classified as children's books due to the age of their core target audience being 9–12, and as

fantasy due to their quest fantasy structure and the presence of fantastic elements such as magic, heroes, gods and mythological creatures. They also include queer characters such as Nico di Angelo and Alex Fierro, both of whom will be analysed in the following chapter from the perspective of how they challenge or conform to heteronormativity.

To sum up, this chapter has defined the genres of both children's literature and fantasy fiction, as well as examined them from the point of view of how heteronormativity — and through it, the issues of sexuality and gender — is present in the genres. It has been argued that children's books often perpetuate heteronormativity because children are regarded as asexual and too young for matters relating to non-normative sexualities and gender presentations. The exclusion of non-normative identities in children's literature is ultimately harmful because for children, reading can be one of the ways through which they shape their worldview and the absence or stereotypical portrayals of queer identities informs young readers that being queer is somehow wrong. The endorsing of heteronormativity is also prevalent in fantasy fiction, despite it being the literature of the impossible, which would allow for imagining of worlds where the norms of society are drastically different from ours.

In addition to defining children's literature and fantasy fiction, previous research on the subject of gender and sexuality in these genres was also presented. It was observed that while there is research conducted on heteronormativity in both genres, studies on heteronormativity in children's fantasy fiction are scarce, if not non-existent. Therefore, there is a need for studies that critically examine how heteronormativity is upheld or dismantled in children's fantasy fiction. This thesis aims to rectify the absence of aforementioned research by focusing on Rick Riordan's work which can be identified as children's fantasy fiction. The findings will be presented in the following chapter.

4. Queer Themes in Riordan's Work

In this chapter, the concepts of stereotyping, hetero- and homonormativity as well as gender performativity will be utilised in order to analyse the ways in which Riordan's works both conform to and disrupt heteronormativity. This will be achieved by focusing predominantly on the characters of Nico di Angelo and Alex Fierro, both of whom are queer; Nico is gay, whereas Alex is transgender and gender fluid. The analysis starts with an exploration of whether Nico and Alex fit queer stereotypes that perpetuate the heteronormative idea that queer people are all the same. The second part focuses on examining whether Riordan's work supports or challenges the hetero- and homonormative traditions of portraying queer people in fiction. In the final section, non-heteronormative gender performances as well as the performative nature of the closet will be discussed.

4.1. Stereotypes in Riordan's Work

As Stuart Hall has suggested, stereotyping is the act of simplifying and exaggerating the characteristics someone has and then reducing the person to those traits (247). Stereotypes are then applied to the group the person belongs to, which results in generalisations such as that women with blond hair are less intelligent. In the media, stereotypes are abundant, and minority groups in particular are at risk of being stereotypically portrayed. This is harmful because, as Lasse Kekki has argued, the lack of variation may lead to the "imitation of the available oppressive, suffocating stereotypes" (48). Since children are still in the process of constructing their identity, it is particularly important that literature and other forms of entertainment aimed at them include non-stereotypical portrayals of people with different identities. In the following sections, the characters of Nico di Angelo and Alex Fierro from Rick Riordan's children's fantasy novels will be examined from the point of view of whether they challenge or conform to prevailing stereotypes about gender and sexuality. Firstly, the

focus is on their appearance and the way they act and how those might reflect stereotypical portrayals of queer people. Secondly, it will be determined whether the roles they have been assigned in the story are stereotypically queer. Lastly, the final section examines the specific plot often reserved for queer people: the coming-out narrative.

4.1.1. Looking Queer, Acting Queer

There are many ways to write stereotypical queer characters, but the most obvious one is to have their looks and behaviour match the stereotypical views concerning the way queer people look and act. Such writing is uninspired and lazy, since the dress senses and personalities of queer people are as varied as those of straight people. Rick Riordan seems to have acknowledged the fact while writing Nico and Alex because Nico, in particular, is far from a stereotypical gay character. The arguments for this claim will be presented in the following paragraphs before moving onto analysing queer stereotypes in relation to Alex.

As B.J. Epstein has noted, gay male characters can often be categorised into one of the following types: a butch athlete, a camp queer or a feminine male (112). Nico, however, does not really fit into any of these stereotypes. I will first present arguments why he is not a camp queer nor a feminine male before claiming why he cannot be classified as a butch athlete either.

The camp queer and the feminine male are both examples of the assumption that gay men are somehow feminine. Nico fitting the camp queer type can easily be ruled out because in none of the novels he appears in is he described as having limp wrists or a swishing walk. Neither does he refer to himself by a girl's name or the pronoun 'she'. These are the most blatant characteristics of a camp queer as observed by B.J. Epstein (110–111). However, there are other stereotypes that reinforce the idea of gay men being effeminate and

that both the camp queer and the feminine male can share. Those will be discussed next, starting with clothes.

Kay Siebler mentions that gay men are often stereotyped as being “fashion conscious” (327), which has resulted in many authors writing gay characters who are interested in fashion and wear clothes that are stylish and colourful. Nico di Angelo defies this stereotype as he does not have a burning passion for clothes. The first time his outfit is described, he is said to be wearing “ripped black jeans and a battered aviator’s jacket that was several sizes too big, unzipped over a black shirt” (*The Battle of the Labyrinth* 38; hereafter abbreviated *BotL*). For the rest of the novels, black clothes and the aviator jacket are his chosen attire which is not an outfit typically associated with gay men. The only time he wears something colourful is in *The Blood of Olympus*, and even then it is out of necessity; his shirt and jacket are ruined and the only replacement he finds at the time is a loud tropical shirt. The shirt offers an instance of showing that Nico might care more about his attire than he usually lets on. When Reyna first sees Nico in the tropical shirt, she starts to comment on it, but Nico quickly interrupts her: “‘Not a word about the shirt,’ he warned. ‘Not one word.’” (*BoO* 244). Nico might not dress like a stereotypical gay man, but he has his own style and does not like having to stray from it.

Other features that can be linked to the stereotype of effeminacy are that gay men have high-pitched voices, they wear jewellery and are emotional. These traits were included in Angela Simon’s list of gay stereotypes mentioned in the theory section on stereotyping. None of these qualities really applies to Nico’s character. He does not seem to have a voice that is higher than male voices normally. It is not actually described in the novels, but if his voice differed from the expected norm, one would expect one of the characters to mention it. When it comes to jewellery, Nico wears one item of it. It is a silver ring that he has acquired by the end of *The Battle of the Labyrinth*. However, the ring is

shaped like a skull and one of the other male characters, Leo, describes it as “wicked” (*HoH* 67), which does not make it sound very feminine.

In a way, Nico is emotional, but not in a way that would fit the category of a camp queer or a feminine male. Gay men and characters can be portrayed as people who cry easily since crying is traditionally linked with femininity. They may also get overly excited about things. This is, in fact, a trait seen in Nico when the reader first encounters him. For example, his initial reaction to hearing he is a demigod is to exclaim it is “cool” and to “[dance] around like he needed to use the restroom” (*TTC* 28) while asking questions relating to Zeus and Nico’s favourite game, *Mythomagic*. However, after the death of his sister, Bianca, Nico’s primary emotion that he demonstrates in many occasions throughout the novels is anger. Anger is typically viewed as a masculine emotion, and thus, it separates Nico from the stereotype of an effeminate gay man.

A further way in which Nico’s character challenges the stereotype of an effeminate gay man is that he is not weak. Since women are typically regarded as the weaker sex, stereotyping gay men with feminine characteristics stereotypes them as powerless as well. Nico, however, is one of the strongest demigods there is, being a child of the Big Three, who are the most powerful of the gods — Zeus, Poseidon and Hades. Consequently, their children are also more powerful than other demigods. Nico might be a small, scrawny boy, but according to Hazel, his half-sister whom he brings back from the dead, he only comes second to Percy:

Until that morning, her brother Nico had been the most powerful demigod she knew. The others at Camp Jupiter saw him as a traveling oddball, about as harmless as the fauns. Hazel knew better. She hadn’t grown up with Nico, hadn’t even known him very long. But she knew Nico was more dangerous than Reyna, or Octavian, or maybe even Jason.

Then she'd met Percy. (*The Son of Neptune* 61; hereafter abbreviated *SoN*)

It could be even argued that Nico is more powerful than Percy. They both fall into Tartarus, the deepest, darkest part of the Underworld inhabited by monsters and where not even the gods go, but Percy has his girlfriend Annabeth with him, and they receive help from a Titan and a giant, while Nico must survive alone. He is eventually overwhelmed and captured by Gaia's forces, but as mentioned, he has no one to help him. At one point Percy wonders how Nico managed to journey in Tartarus without company and keep his sanity intact and admits that Nico "[has] more strength than Percy had given him credit for" (*HoH* 347). Moreover, Percy and Annabeth do not see Tartarus in its true, horrible form, but Nico does because he is the son of Hades, the god of the Underworld. Percy only sees a glimpse of it when he almost dies:

Percy realized what he *saw* of Tartarus was only a watered-down version of its true horror – only what his demigod brain could handle. The worst of it was veiled, the same way the Mist veiled monsters from mortal sight. Now as Percy died he began to see the truth.

The air was the breath of Tartarus. All these monsters were just blood cells circulating through his body. Everything Percy saw was a dream in the mind of the dark god of the pit.

This must have been the way *Nico* had seen Tartarus, and it had almost destroyed his sanity. (*HoH* 239; emphasis original)

Nico's act of surviving Tartarus alone while being aware of its true horrors is a testimony to his strength, a stark contrast to the stereotype of a feminine gay man.

While some of the examples above, such as Nico being a strong character and prone to feelings of anger, make Nico seem like a masculine character, he cannot really be

categorised as a butch athlete. While he is a good swordsman, his strength comes chiefly from the powers his heritage grants him and seems to be more mental than physical. He is not the hypermasculine man who survives everything on his own. Rather, in between the moments of displaying his strengths, he also needs help from the other characters on several occasions. For example, Percy, Jason and Piper save him from being held captive by two giants in *The Mark of Athena* (506; hereafter abbreviated *MoA*) and Reyna lends him strength when they are shadow-travelling in *The Blood of Olympus* (48). Furthermore, Nico's personality is not highly masculine. For example, rather than being a leader, he tends to stay in the shadows and observe; he displays feelings of fondness towards his half-sister; he is interested in things that can be considered geeky, such as pirates and the card game Mythomagic. In other words, Nico is a complex character when it comes to his personality and the way he acts, thus preventing him from being defined by the stereotypes that gay characters are usually restricted by.

Compared to Nico, Alex Fierro is a more stereotypical character. While Nico's sexuality is revealed in the seventh novel after his first appearance in *The Titan's Curse*, Alex makes her gender identity known in the very first conversation she has with Magnus in *The Hammer of Thor*:

“What did you mean earlier?” I asked. “When you said—”

“Call me *she*? I'm gender fluid and transgender, idiot. [...]” (54; emphasis original)

Alex's identity as a gender-fluid and transgender person is one of the first things the readers learn about her, and, to some extent, she remains a stereotypical queer character who is “LGBTQ first and everything else second” (Epstein 63). This stems from the fact that the reader is often reminded of Alex's gender fluidity through conversations. She tends to lecture the other characters about issues related to gender, which at points transforms the novels into

didactic books which “try to teach readers about LGBTQ people and the LGBTQ community” (Epstein 27). One feature of such issue books is that they include moments where “one character educates another about queerness in a rather unnatural way, whereby the reader is also educated” (Epstein 26). Alex does this fairly often, despite claiming that it is not her responsibility to educate Magnus — and through him, the reader — about gender fluidity and transgender people (*HoT* 54). This is most obvious when Magnus and Alex visit the mansion that Magnus’s uncle owns and Alex explains that while she is a shape-shifter, she cannot control her gender, and why she prefers not to be called by the pronouns ‘they’ and ‘them’ (*HoT* 271–273). She dumps a large amount of information about her gender identity on Magnus in one sitting, which may seem rather forced.

As Kay Siebler has argued, media portrayals of transgender people focus on corrective surgery and the wish to pass as a person of the opposite sex, which has led to transgender characters being either pre-operative or post-operative (327–328). This perpetuates the idea that “[o]ne simply can’t be transqueer (someone who rejects the binaries of masculine/feminine and male/female); a person must either be a confused lesbian/gay man, a woman who is ‘really’ a man, or a surgically reconstructed male or female who now abides by the gender system” (Siebler 337). Alex, however, defies these categories because she is comfortable with her gender identity and embraces the change: “[...] I don’t want to use the same pronouns all the time, because that’s not me. I change a lot. That’s sort of the point. [...]” (*HoT* 272–273). It is never explicitly stated whether she has undergone surgery, but considering she is homeless for two years before dying and going to Valhalla, and her mortal parents are not accepting of her gender fluidity, one can assume that she has not. Alex, therefore, seems to be a transgender character who challenges the stereotype that transgender people must have their biological sex “fixed” in order to be truly happy with themselves.

However, the subversion of the stereotypical portrayal of transgender people always having to transition is threatened by Alex's shape-shifting ability. Alex can take the form of an animal, and she does so many times in battle throughout the novels. That is, however, not the full extent of her ability; she can also change her human form, which she demonstrates when she poses as her half-sister Samirah. Alex does not really adjust her appearance as she changes gender, but the reader might wonder if her seemingly androgynous looks are the result of her shape-shifting ability. Alex is not necessarily described as androgynous in the novels, but it is suggested by the fact that she has "unearthly beauty" (*HoT* 50) and that Magnus has no trouble shifting his perception the first time Alex declares being female when Magnus had assumed she was male: "A second ago, he had been very obviously a boy to me. Now she was very obviously a girl" (*HoT* 52). However, shape-shifting is an ability that takes energy and that Alex cannot always control. For example, once she accidentally turns into a gorilla because she is nervous (*HoT* 393), and during one flashback scene where she is physically bullied and "too panicked and terrified to shape-shift" (*HoT* 337), she still looks like a younger version of herself. If Alex were maintaining her androgynous appearance through shape-shifting, it would continuously sap her energy and the façade would likely have cracked during the novels. Thus, her status as character who is "content with [her] gender expression regardless of whether or how it matches (or doesn't) [her] biological sex" (Siebler 338) is not undermined by her ability to shape-shift because she does not use it to modify her appearance to comply with her gender.

Clothes are often an important factor in stereotypical portrayals of transgender people. They are used to "conceal the body in order to display a rigid gender identity as either masculine or feminine" (Siebler 323). Therefore, a transman will wear clothes that are traditionally masculine and bind his breasts while dresses and skirts are stereotypically a transwoman's chosen attire. If Alex followed this stereotype, she would wear clothes that

were specific to the gender she identifies as and change them when her gender changes. Instead, Alex usually dresses in clothes that are not exclusively masculine or feminine, which Magnus notices the first time he sees Alex as male: “His wardrobe wasn’t gender specific. He wore his usual rose high-tops with skinny green jeans and a pink long-sleeved T-shirt” (*HoT* 239). Excluding a few exceptions, her outfits always include shades of green and pink, which are traditionally seen as masculine and feminine colours, respectively. Through combining the colours and choosing outfits that are not gender specific, Alex defies the idea that transgender people always want to pass as a person of the opposite sex, which is reinforced in stereotypical portrayals of transgender people dressing in traditionally masculine or feminine clothes.

4.1.2. Queer Roles, Queer Plots

Queer characters are often written as secondary characters with limited importance to the overall plot. As Cart and Jenkins have argued, they “are pictured as unfortunates doomed to either a premature death or a life of despair lived at the darkest margins of society” (xvi). Their findings deal with homosexual characters, but they can be applied to queer characters in general. In this section, I will examine the ways in which Nico di Angelo and Alex Fierro challenge as well as conform to these stereotypical roles and plots reserved for queer characters.

Neither Nico nor Alex is the main protagonist of their respective series. The *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series is told from Percy’s point of view while *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* posits Magnus as its narrator and protagonist. In *The Heroes of Olympus*, the story is told from multiple points of view, and in the final instalment, *The Blood of Olympus*, there are chapters from Nico’s perspective, which makes him the first queer character in Riordan’s work to have their own point of view. This does not necessarily

mean he is one of the main protagonists of the story, though, as he is not one of the seven demigods of the great prophecy who have their own points of view in more than one novel.

Nico and Alex may not be the protagonists of the novels, but they are still major characters who influence the plot; they could not be omitted without it affecting the story. In fact, Nico and Alex are both heroes, which is ground-breaking because not many queer children see themselves portrayed in fiction as ones. Nico plays an important role in the wars in both the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* and *The Heroes of Olympus* series. For example, in *The Last Olympian* (hereafter abbreviated *TLO*), which is the final instalment of the first series, he persuades his father, Hades, to partake in the war and defend Mount Olympus from Kronos's army, whereas in the second series, he transports the statue Athena Parthenos from Greece to Camp Half-Blood in New York with his ability to shadow-travel, an act that prevents a war between the Roman and Greek demigods. Alex, on the other hand, helps in hampering Loki's plans of starting Ragnarok. She poses as the bride to Thrym the giant in Samirah's stead — who has sworn not to even pretend to marry someone else than her fiancé — in order to retrieve Thor's hammer. Furthermore, her skills in pottery are invaluable when the giant Hrungrnir challenges Alex, Magnus and T.J. to a duel where he fights against T.J., and his second, a warrior made out of clay, fights against the trio's ceramic warrior, made by Alex.

As mentioned above, in stereotypical queer plots, queer characters often tend to die or face the life of an outcast. Nico defies the first stereotype since he does not die. Alex, however, is a trickier case because, technically, she is dead. Alex, identifying as male, dies when he saves a homeless man from a pack of wolves. However, because of his valiant death, Alex is brought to Valhalla and becomes an einherji, one of the undead soldiers of Odin's army. Therefore, Alex's death cannot be necessarily regarded as a stereotypical portrayal of a queer character's fate since it does not mark the end of her presence in the

story. In fact, Alex's death is the premise for her inclusion in the novels since Magnus, the narrator of the series, is also an einherji.

Both Nico and Alex are outcasts to some extent. Their status as outsiders stems largely from their parentage, but their queerness also contributes to it. In Alex's case, she is at first distrusted because she is a child of Loki, who is the main villain of the *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* series. While Magnus finds it hard to believe that Alex works with Loki after meeting her, the other einherjar of the floor nineteen initially think so (*HoT* 78–79). Some of the other characters are slow to trust Alex because of her gender fluidity as well. She is repeatedly called an argr by Halfborn Gunderson, for example, an offensive term that means unmanly and is used to refer to gender-fluid people (*HoT* 79). While Halfborn claims that the term is not an insult if the person is gender fluid, he still thinks that “[one] can’t trust an argr in combat” (*HoT* 79). Another character who doubts Alex because of her gender identity is Thor, who opposes Alex posing as Samirah at the wedding because he does not believe an argr is suitable for it (*HoT* 367). Alex, however, objects to being called an argr: “‘What have I told you about that term?’ Alex said. ‘I will decide what is manly, unmanly, womanly, or unwomanly for me. [...]’” (*HoT* 240; emphasis original). Calling Alex an argr brings attention to her queerness and marks her as different, an outsider. However, the doubts towards Alex vanish fairly quickly as the other characters realise that Alex's loyalties do not lie with Loki, and she is accepted into the group, thus avoiding “a life of despair at the darkest margins of society” (Cart and Jenkins xvi).

Nico is more of an outcast than Alex. While Alex has found her place in the odd group of einherjar on floor nineteen of Hotel Valhalla by the end of *The Hammer of Thor*, Nico spends most of the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* and *The Heroes of Olympus* series away from Camp Half-Blood, a relatively safe place for Greek demigods, because he feels like he does not belong there. Even when Nico is welcomed to the camp as a hero after

the war with Kronos, he does not stay long because he once again starts to feel as if the other demigods would not want him there: “After about a week, his welcome wore thin. Campers would jump when he walked up behind them. He would emerge from the shadows at the campfire, startle somebody and see the discomfort in their eyes. *Are you still here? Why are you here?*” (*BoO* 154; emphasis original). The other characters often describe him in an unfavourable light, which resembles the way in which gay characters are sometimes depicted as “sinister predators lurking in the shadows of sinister settings” (Cart and Jenkins xvi). For example, Leo finds him “creepy” (*MoA* 570) and says that Nico gives him “the freaky-deakies” (*HoH* 67), Annabeth describes him as having “a darkness in him that made her uneasy” (*MoA* 228), and Jason does not trust him because “[h]is loyalties weren’t always clear” (*HoH* 267). However, the distrust Nico faces does not stem from his sexuality but from his parentage, as is the case with Alex. Nico is the son of Hades, who is also an outcast among the gods, and it grants Nico powers that unnerve other characters. For example, after turning another demigod into a ghost and banishing him to the Underworld, Reyna and Coach Hedge are horrified and later Reyna admits it was “hard to watch... hard to process” (*BoO* 300).

While the other characters brand Nico as an outsider because of factors other than his sexuality, it does contribute to his isolation, but only because Nico himself sees it as an issue. After all, he grew up in Italy in the 1930s and 1940s when being gay was a crime. The shame caused by his sexuality is so strong that it is partly responsible for Nico leaving Camp Half-Blood multiple times. This is implied when Will Solace becomes angry after Nico reveals his plans of leaving the camp for good after the battle against Gaia: “‘Nobody at Camp Half-Blood ever pushed you away. You have friends – or at least people who would *like* to be your friend. You pushed yourself away. [...]’” (*BoO* 427; emphasis original). Once Nico is able to accept his own sexuality at the end of *The Blood of Olympus*, he decides to

stay at the camp after all because he no longer feels like an outcast, which makes possible a happy ending denied from other marginalised characters in fiction.

While Nico and Alex fit the stereotype of a queer character as an outcast, it is also interesting how they to some extent manage to challenge the stereotype. The reason they are initially shunned derives more from their parentage than their queerness. In other words, their sexual and gender identities contribute to the distrust they face, but they are not the main factor for it. It shows the reader that one does not need to be defined by their queerness and have it be the source of all the problems they face. It is a welcome change to how queer characters are usually portrayed in fiction for young readers; in her study of 32 young adult novels with queer content, B.J. Epstein found that over 70 per cent of the texts indicate that “queerness is a problem or causes problems” (75).

In early queer fiction for children and young adults, many of the queer characters were depicted as leading “isolated and lonely lives” (Jenkins qtd. in Epstein 93). Consequently, the number of stories where queer characters were involved in romantic storylines was limited, which has been noted by Tony Grima: “Young heterosexual love is ever-present on the big and small screens and in books, but young gay or lesbian love is rarely seen” (qtd. in Epstein 192). However, nowadays the number is on the rise since the number of books for children and young adults with queer content has increased (Cart and Jenkins xv), and there are bound to be some that challenge the stereotype of a sad, lonely queer. Gay male characters, in particular, seem to be included in love stories more frequently nowadays, with some gaining attention even among the mainstream audiences; the film *Love, Simon*, based on the novel *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli, for instance, is the first teen romantic film featuring a gay protagonist by a major film studio (Gustines n.p.). Although Nico di Angelo is not included in a romance plot in the texts

studied in this thesis, he is confirmed to be in a relationship with Will Solace in a later book series, which is an addition to the growing list of gay relationships in children's literature.

While the number of gay characters in relationships in adolescent fiction is on the increase, it is still rare to see transgender characters involved in a romance, simply because the number of children's books that feature transgender characters is low (Epstein 144). Rick Riordan's *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* series is, therefore, transformative because it is Alex, a transgender and gender-fluid character, who is Magnus's love interest rather than Samirah or Mallory Keen, for example, both of whose gender identity aligns with their assigned sex and who would be heteronormatively more acceptable choices. Since transgender characters are often portrayed as "freaks or dysfunctional and confused" (Siebler 321), it is even more ground-breaking that Magnus finds Alex attractive, particularly because he is the narrator of the series and the reader is most likely to identify with him. Magnus is often caught staring at Alex, regardless of whether Alex identifies as male or female, and Halfborn even remarks that "[t]here's no shame in being attracted, Magnus" (*HoT* 80). The first time Magnus sees Alex dressed for the wedding, he is rendered speechless and he finds it hard to look away from her (*HoT* 377). Magnus's interest in Alex is expressed in other ways as well, such as how he feels comfortable with taking Alex to visit Uncle Randolph's mansion when the thought of going with his other friends is "too personal, too painful" (*SotD* 19). Magnus also claims that Alex kissing him "[...] was just about the best thing that ever happened to [him]" (*SotD* 374). While Alex and Magnus do not necessarily enter into an official relationship since Alex's last words on the matter are "I'll keep thinking about it. I'll get back to you. [...]" (*SotD* 406), they do kiss twice and there is clearly interest from both sides; Alex initiates both kisses, and Magnus reacts approvingly, which is expressed through his thoughts.

Including a character who is transgender and gender fluid in a popular children's book series, published by a subsidiary of Disney, a company that is notorious for its heteronormativity, is a daring move. Having Alex as the love interest of the protagonist of the series is even more daring because it means Magnus is not heterosexual. After all, he is kissed by Alex twice; the first time, Alex identifies as female, but the second time, he identifies as male. Magnus takes a moment to reflect on this after the second kiss:

I'll be honest. A small part of my brain thought, *Alex is male right now. I have just been kissed by a dude. How do I feel about that?*

The rest of my brain answered: *I have just been kissed by Alex Fierro. I am absolutely great with that.* (SotD 406; emphasis original)

The brief acknowledgment of Alex's gender is important because it leaves no room for the reader to assume that Magnus is only interested in Alex because she identifies as female most of the time. Magnus is attracted to Alex whether Alex is a she or a he. Magnus's sexuality is never explicitly stated in the story, but his feelings for Alex make him undoubtedly queer.

4.1.3. The Coming-Out Narrative

As B.J. Epstein suggests, stories dealing with queer characters stereotypically focus on their coming out, but this is a limiting view of queer lives since coming out is an element of being queer, not the defining factor of their lives (74–75). Furthermore, the stories that feature coming out tend to depict it as “a dramatic, stressful experience that may involve rejection, verbal and even physical abuse, problems in school or with friends or peers, and potentially even death” (Epstein 92). In many coming-out narratives the life of the queer character after the act of coming out is difficult (Epstein 93) or coming out is the climax of the story and it is up to the reader to imagine what happens next (Mallan 19). The overwhelmingly prevalent

trend of depicting coming out as distressing and as the most prominent factor of queer people's lives in literature for young readers is harmful because it might discourage young queer people from coming out and convey the message that being queer is wrong. Therefore, there is a grave need for more diverse plots for queer characters and for stories where coming out is not a terrible experience. After all, out of the 32 young adult novels that B.J. Epstein examines in her book *Are the Kids All Right?*, 23 of them feature a coming-out storyline and out of those 23 novels, 21 of them suggest that the act of coming out is a stressful experience (75–76). In this section, I will examine whether the stressful coming-out narrative is perpetuated through Nico and Alex.

In Nico's case, coming out is, unfortunately, depicted in a fairly stereotypical way. While he is granted more diverse storylines than queer characters usually, such as learning not to hold onto grudges and being a hero in two wars, in *The Heroes of Olympus* series the coming-out narrative becomes the most prominent one when Nico is forced to admit his feelings for Percy in *The House of Hades*. Since there are no chapters from Nico's point of view until *The Blood of Olympus*, the coming out and the moments leading up to it are told from Jason's perspective. Throughout most of the novels Nico is included in, there are hardly any hints about his sexuality because the other characters assume him to be straight. Only a few pages before the scene where Nico confesses his feelings is his hidden sexuality alluded to. For example, Jason is confused why Nico has made a promise to Percy when he seems to hate him (*HoH* 273) and the god of the West Wind, Favonius, says: ““The one you care for most... plunged into Tartarus, and still you will not allow the truth?”” (*HoH* 278). At the time, Jason thinks Favonius is referring to Annabeth, which keeps Nico's queer identity hidden for a few more pages. As Nico's sexuality may be a surprise to the reader, it does not necessarily follow the stereotype where the queer character's whole story revolves around coming out. However, the way the focus of Nico's story shifts onto his sexuality and

the stress of coming out after the confession is stereotypical. Before examining the shift in focus, however, it is necessary to discuss the scene where Nico admits his crush on Percy.

Nico's coming-out scene reinforces the stereotype that the act of coming out is stressful, even traumatic. After all, Nico is essentially outed, which means to "publicly [expose] people for living in the **closet**, that is, for keeping their queer desires private rather than public" (Parker 175; bold original). It is a horrible way of having one's queerness revealed because it does not happen on one's own terms. During the scene in *The House of Hades*, Nico and Jason face the god of love, Cupid. Even before they meet him, Nico is extremely nervous; he is trembling and the emotional turmoil causes the grass around him to wither and die (*HoH* 283). This indicates how terrified he is because he seems to know that Cupid wants him to confess his feelings in order for them to obtain the Diocletian's sceptre. When Cupid appears, he attacks the two while staying invisible, taunting Nico who claims he is not afraid of Cupid, to which Cupid replies: "*I scare you very, very much. Face me. Be honest*" (*HoH* 288; emphasis original). The accusations of Nico being a coward lead him to such emotional turmoil that the "ground at his feet [splits] open and skeletons [crawl] forth" (*HoH* 289), and the anxiety spills out of him in "waves of darkness" (*HoH* 289). When they hit Jason, he sees Nico's memories of Percy, which makes him understand that Nico does not have a crush on Annabeth, but on Percy. In the end, Nico is even able to voice the secret himself, but it does not erase the fact that he is forced into it by Cupid. It is an unsettling scene that portrays coming out as a near-traumatic experience that Nico later reflects on with anger: "Sharing his secret crush hadn't been the worst of it. Eventually he might have done that, in his own time, in his own way. But being *forced* to talk about Percy, being bullied and harassed and strong-armed simply for Cupid's amusement..." (*BoO* 141–142; emphasis original).

As mentioned above, following the revelation in *The House of Hades*, Nico's story is more stereotypical than before because it suggests that coming out and being queer are stressful and difficult. In the chapters told from Nico's point of view in *The Blood of Olympus*, the reader discovers how much Nico's sexuality has contributed to his isolation and how he feels he will never be accepted because of it: "But how could his fate be anything *but* sad? Even if he lived through this quest, he would have to leave both camps forever. That was the only way he would find peace. He wished there was another option – a choice that didn't hurt like the waters of the Phlegethon – but he couldn't see one" (*BoO* 155; emphasis original). Nico is so certain that he will be rejected if he comes out that leaving feels like the best and only option for him, and even that is painful. Through Nico's pessimistic thoughts, the novel perpetuates the idea that queer people's lives are "upsetting" (Epstein 76).

There are two more coming-out scenes in Nico's story because Jason is the only other character present during the scene in *The House of Hades*, meaning there are other characters who are not aware of Nico's sexuality. The first one, once again, portrays coming out as a distressing incidence where Nico loses control of his emotions and his secrets spill out: "According to Reyna, the air around him dropped to freezing. The ground blackened. In one horrible cry, he unleashed a flood of pain and anger on everyone in the clearing. [...] They felt Nico's anguish from his days on the *Argo II* and his encounter with Cupid in the ruins of Salona" (*BoO* 294; emphasis original). In the final scene of the novel where Nico is present, he admits to Percy that he used to have a crush on him (*BoO* 486), and it is how coming out should have been for Nico from the start in order to avoid perpetuating the idea that a queer person cannot come out without it being a stressful experience; in the scene, Nico comes out voluntarily and he feels no emotional turmoil because of it. However, despite the scene being a positive portrayal of coming out, it also marks Nico's last appearance in

the series. Consequently, it turns the coming-out scene into the climax of Nico's story, which is how the act of coming out is often portrayed particularly in young adult fiction (Mallan 19). It reinforces the idea that coming out of the closet is the most prominent feature of queer people's lives (Epstein 75). In Nico's case, the coming-out scene being the climax of his involvement in the series disregards his other accomplishments that are not related to his sexuality, such as coming to terms with his sister's death and being a hero in two different wars.

While coming out is stereotypically stressful for Nico in the series, the way the other characters react to it is not. In many novels, queer characters face rejection, or they are bullied or shunned after coming out; B.J. Epstein provides an extensive analysis of such outcomes in her study of queer-themed young adult and children's literature (76–90). Nico, however, is accepted by every character who learns about his sexuality. After confessing his crush on Percy in *The House of Hades*, Nico is assured by Jason that “[i]f the others found out [...] [he'd] have that many more people to back [him] up and to unleash the fury of the gods on anybody who gives [him] trouble” (292). Hades also seems to be aware of his son's sexuality and instead of rejecting Nico because of it, he teases him about his crush on Percy (*BoO* 147). Reyna and Coach Hedge also accept Nico when his sexuality is revealed, which amazes Nico:

Nico wasn't sure what to say. They'd seen his deepest secrets. They knew who he was, what he was.

But they didn't seem to care. No... they cared *more*. (*BoO* 302; emphasis original)

While Percy struggles to say something after Nico tells him about his former crush on him, it does not seem malicious; he is simply surprised as he had thought that Nico hates him. Annabeth, who is also present in the scene, smiles and gives Nico a high five (*BoO* 486).

While the acceptance that Nico receives from the other characters does not necessarily compensate for the stereotypical portrayal where queerness and coming out are regarded as difficult, it is still refreshing and encouraging to have novels that differ from the norm in regard to how the other characters react to queerness.

In the *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* series, Alex's storyline differs from the stereotypical coming-out narrative reserved for queer characters. Coming out is not the focus of her story, nor is it a climax that happens at the end of it. After all, Alex's differing gender identity is revealed in the first scene she appears in. Before that scene, the reader is led to believe that Alex is a boy since Samirah first refers to Alex as her brother (*HoT* 29) and other characters use the pronoun 'he' when they talk about him because Alex dies and is brought to Hotel Valhalla while he identifies as male. However, when Magnus meets Alex for the first time, her gender has shifted to female, which she is quick to proclaim when Mallory uses the wrong pronoun (*HoT* 51). A few pages later Alex specifies that she is gender fluid as well as transgender (*HoT* 54). Since Alex announces her queer identity the first time the reader encounters her, she cannot be seen as a character whose story revolves around the pressure of coming out. It is a striking contrast to how queer characters are traditionally written in a way that implies that coming out is one of the defining features of queer people's lives (Epstein 74–75). Furthermore, unlike Nico who struggles with accepting his sexuality, Alex is already comfortable with her non-normative gender identity when she is introduced in the story. In fact, when Alex, identifying as male, is first brought to Valhalla, he freaks out because he fears that being an einherji means he is permanently stuck in one gender, rather than shifting between male and female (*HoT* 93). Gender fluidity is a part of Alex's identity that she has learnt to embrace and does not want to erase. Considering that transgender and gender-fluid characters are rare in children's literature, and positive

portrayals of them even more so, it is notable to have a character like Alex who does not struggle with her queer identity.

Similar to Nico in *The Heroes of Olympus* series, Alex is not rejected by the other characters when she comes out. There is slight confusion when Alex corrects Mallory when she uses the pronoun he, but otherwise the main cast quickly adapt to Alex's gender fluidity, and for the rest of the story, they use the pronouns Alex asks them to use. Confusion is the usual reaction from other characters as well when Alex objects to the pronoun or word they have used to refer to her. For example, when Thor calls Alex an argr while they are forming a plan for the upcoming wedding, she corrects him that the correct word is a gender-fluid person and Thor tries to adjust to it by calling her "our gender argr bride" (*HoT* 371). While the reaction Alex receives is not as readily accepting as the one Nico receives, confusion that turns into acceptance is far better than the hostility queer characters are stereotypically greeted with when they come out.

To sum up, in this chapter Rick Riordan's novels were examined in relation to queer stereotypes and it can be concluded that they both reproduce and challenge the stereotypes through Nico di Angelo and Alex Fierro. For example, Nico falls victim to the stereotypical plot of coming out that a majority of queer characters face and yet he defies many gay stereotypes in terms of how he looks and acts. Alex, on the other hand, evades the coming-out narrative becoming the focal point of her story by claiming a queer identity immediately and she is involved in a romantic plot that most transgender characters are denied, but the way she often brings attention to her queerness is stereotypical. Moreover, both Nico and Alex occupy the stereotypical queer role of an outsider and yet they manage to resist it since their statuses as outcasts stem from other factors than just their queerness.

4.2. Hetero- and Homonormativity in Riordan's Work

Heteronormativity, as defined by Cathy J. Cohen, means the discourses, practices and institutions that “legitimise and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and ‘natural’ within society” (qtd. Carroll 7). It is a system deeply engrained in our society that is harmful for individuals that deviate from the expected norm, whether it is through their sexuality, gender identity or some other aspect that is not desirable in a heteronormative life, such as homelessness. In this section, it will be examined how, on the one hand, Riordan's work tries to dismantle heteronormativity and how it, on the other hand, upholds the concept through homonormativity, for example, which is the practice of incorporating heteronormativity into queer lives in order to be accepted in the heteronormative world (Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan 849). Firstly, the presence of compulsory heterosexuality and the ways in which it is both challenged and endorsed through the handling of gender and sexuality in the novels will be discussed. This will be followed with an analysis of the concept of intersectionality and the way it is or is not utilised through the characters of Nico and Alex in the novels to denounce homonormative identities. Finally, Judith Halberstam's idea of queer time will be presented and applied to Riordan's work.

4.2.1. Compulsory Heterosexuality

Compulsory heterosexuality is one of the results of heteronormativity and it manifests itself in the way people are usually expected to be straight (Parker 163). While the notion of compulsory heterosexuality only refers to sexuality, I would suggest that its reach also extends to gender identity through the demand that people should conform to the gender they are assigned at birth. In this section, I will provide evidence for the existence of compulsory heterosexuality and the subsequent endorsing of heteronormativity in Riordan's work.

However, I will also discuss how Riordan critiques compulsory heterosexuality by showing the negative consequences it has on Alex and Nico.

In the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* and *The Heroes of Olympus* series, compulsory heterosexuality is present when the other characters assume Nico to be heterosexual. This is evident in the way they speculate that he has feelings for Annabeth: “Piper had also mentioned a rumour that Nico had a crush on Annabeth” (*HoH* 273). Even Annabeth herself suspects it is true (*MoA* 227), and the reader is also encouraged to think so, since Nico often behaves more kindly towards her than Percy:

“Nico,” I said, “we need your help.”

He folded his arms and scowled. Then Annabeth put her hand on his shoulder.

“Nico,” she said. “Please.”

Slowly, his expression softened. “All right,” he said reluctantly. “For *you*. But I’m not staying.” (*BotL* 303; emphasis original)

On the one hand, it is discouraging that even in texts filled with magic, monsters and gods, heterosexuality is still the expected norm. On the other hand, the revelation of Nico’s sexuality offers the reader an opportunity to contemplate why they may have made the assumption of Nico being straight. Being aware of heteronormative expectations is the first step in discarding them.

As mentioned above, the expectation of sex and gender aligning can also be regarded as a consequence of compulsory heterosexuality, which has resulted in the homonormative tradition of portraying queer characters as “maintaining traditionally appropriate gender presentation” (Lester 247), even when they are genderqueer; meaning that they do not fit into the normative gender categories of male and female. In *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard*, compulsory heterosexuality is shown in the way Magnus is confused about the variety of clothes in Alex’s room before he meets her for the first time:

The whirlwind of clothes in this room didn't make sense to me—jeans, skirts, jackets, ties, and party gowns, most in shades of pink and green.

“How many people live here?” I asked. “Does he have a sister?”

(*HoT* 39)

Since Magnus has been told that Alex is Samirah's brother, he cannot reconcile the array of traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine clothes with the information, nor adjust his heteronormative assumption of Alex's gender identity and presentation. It is only when Alex corrects Mallory on the use of the pronoun 'he' that Magnus — and the reader with him — realises his mistake of assuming Alex's gender.

While *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* is a work of fantasy that does not imagine a world without heteronormative assumptions, it does, however, challenge the homonormative practice of gender conformity. Transgender characters are often portrayed in a way that “[upholds] the gender binary as the norm, because every transgender character can still be categorized as having fixed gender identity of male or female” (Lester 251). This is reflected, for example, in the traditionally gender-specific clothes they wear in order to follow heteronormative gender roles. Alex, in contrast, mostly dresses in clothes that are not gender specific, as was discussed in the chapter about stereotypes. However, Alex has to wear a wedding dress in *The Hammer of Thor* when she poses as Samirah in order to pretend to marry the giant, and it is a missed opportunity to further confront homonormative portrayals of queer characters because Alex identifies as female during the occasion. Had she identified as male, it would have challenged the heteronormative notion that dresses are strictly for women. There is also a flashback scene in which Alex wears a skirt (*SotD* 146). It is told from Magnus's point of view and he refers to Alex with the pronoun 'she', which would be another occasion of Alex conforming to the expected gender presentation.

However, since Alex does not explicitly state her gender in the scene, it is left ambiguous, since Magnus could be reading it wrong.

In Riordan's work, compulsory heterosexuality is challenged further by showing the harmful consequences it has on queer people. In a heteronormative culture where heterosexuality is compulsory, queerness is considered abnormal, which has led to homophobia. Robert Dale Parker has defined homophobia as "a prejudice against and fear of so-called homosexuals" (179). While the term only indicates fear of homosexuals, it can be extended to refer to fear of queer people in general.

Both Alex and Nico are subjected to homophobia, but in different ways. In a flashback scene, Alex is shown to be a victim of a physical assault, which is one of the ways homophobia manifests itself: "[A] group of teenagers [were] standing around ten-year-old Alex and kicking her, calling her a freak" (*HoT* 337). Alex being homeless is also a result of the homophobic nature of a heteronormative society since Alex's father kicks her out because of her non-normative gender identity. It brings attention to a serious issue that is often ignored in homonormative portrayals of transgender people: A disproportional number of homeless youth in the United States are transgender (Shelton 10). Riordan's work, however, does not ignore the issue. Instead, the novel explicitly states the problem through Magnus:

A huge percentage of the homeless teens I'd met had been assigned one gender at birth but identified as another, or they felt like the whole boy/girl binary didn't apply to them. They ended up on the streets because—shocker—their families didn't accept them. Nothing says "tough love" like kicking your non-heteronormative kid to the curb so they can experience abuse, drugs, high suicide rates, and constant physical danger. (*HoT* 55; emphasis original)

While it is important to raise awareness about the dangers of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, concentrating on them poses a risk of making queer lives seem overly depressing. Riordan avoids this by introducing Alex in the story after she has already overcome her status as a homeless person — although, it would have been preferable if she had overcome it through other means than dying — and her experiences with queer-bashing are in the past.

The consequences of compulsory heterosexuality are different for Nico than for Alex because he does not necessarily face homophobia from the other characters. Instead, Nico struggles with internalised homophobia, which is “the gay person's direction of negative social attitudes toward the self, leading to a devaluation of the self and resultant internal conflicts and poor self-regard” (Meyer and Dean, n.p.). Nico’s internalised homophobia, as well as his parentage and being from another age, have convinced him that he will never be accepted by anyone: “[...] I’m the son of *Hades*, Jason. I might as well be covered in blood or sewage, the way people treat me. I don’t belong anywhere. I’m not even from this *century*. But even that’s not enough to set me apart. I’ve got to be – to be –” (*HoH* 428; emphasis original). In addition to being a factor in Nico’s isolation, internalised homophobia results in a moment of homosexual panic in *The Titan’s Curse*. The idea of homosexual panic means the fear experienced by heterosexual or closeted people of being labelled as queer, which can result in acts of violence (Parker 181). In Nico’s case, it leads to him running away from Camp Half-Blood after he saves Percy from skeletal enemies even when Nico is angry at him for not keeping Bianca safe (*TTC* 289–291). This makes Nico realise his feelings for Percy and he leaves because he is “terrified of his own powers, and his own emotions” (*HoH* 290). Through Nico, Riordan shows the dangers heteronormativity can pose to a queer person’s mental health. However, there is, once again, a risk of depicting

queerness as inherently depressing, but readers are given a sense of hope when Nico has found self-acceptance by the end of *The Blood of Olympus* and he is given a happy ending.

4.2.2. Intersectionality

Intersectionality has been defined by Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge as

a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience. [...] When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. (2)

In homonormative portrayals of queer people, the multiple forms of oppression are ignored. Instead, “[q]ueer people with race and class privilege—White, middle or upper class—are more visible and more powerful in media, literature, and institutions than queer people of color and lower-class queer people” (Lester 255). In this section, the concept of intersectionality defined in the theory section will be utilised to analyse whether Nico and Alex represent queer people of multiple minority identities, or whether they support the homonormative view that queer people are “white, able-bodied, middle-class and nominally Christian” (Epstein 160).

Both Nico and Alex belong to an American minority group based on their ethnicity from the mortal side of their families; Nico was born in Italy and lived there as a young child before moving to Washington D.C. before World War II whereas Alex's grandfather emigrated from Mexico. They have both incorporated their ethnic background into their identity. Nico, for example, can still speak Italian (*HoH* 123) and Alex speaks Spanish (*SotD* 27). However, whether their ethnicity in combination with their queerness creates an intersection of oppression is debatable. Nico, in particular, is essentially white.

While he has olive skin (*TTC* 8) due to his Italian heritage, in most of the novels Nico is described as rather pale (*TLO* 24; *HoH* 426), making it seem unlikely he would face prejudice for his skin colour and ethnicity. Alex, on the other hand, is of Mexican descent, not only queer, which would create an intersection of oppressed identities since both queer and Mexican people are discriminated against in the United States. Alex's skin colour is never explicitly described, but it is said to be "a few shades lighter than Sam's" (*HoT* 380) who is of Middle Eastern descent. This, combined with Alex's Mexican roots, suggests that Alex cannot be considered white, which defies the homonormative portrayal of queer people as overwhelmingly white.

Class is another facet of oppression that is often ignored in queer representations (Lester 255). This is also the case in Riordan's work to the extent that both Nico and Alex come from upper-middle-class families. Alex's father is the owner of a family business that makes ceramics and has earned him millions (*SotD* 162–163). He is described as a man dressed in "pressed black slacks, shiny black shoes, a white dress shirt so crisp and bright it hurt [Magnus's] eyes" (*SotD* 145). Furthermore, he and his family, including Alex, live in "a three-story mansion" with "[w]hite-painted columns [flanking] the house's entrance" (*SotD* 144–145). Evidently, Alex comes from a family with wealth. However, she loses her status as an upper-middle-class person when she is disowned, which creates an intersection of three oppressed identities; Alex is queer, of Mexican descent and homeless. As discussed above, homelessness is a reality many genderqueer people, in particular those of colour, face, and Alex embodies that reality, at least until she dies and is brought to Valhalla where the einherjar can be seen as of equal class since they are all provided with clothes, food, accommodation and money for the mortal world.

The upper- or middle-class status of Nico's family is displayed in a flashback scene that shows the death of Maria di Angelo, Nico's mother. The family, including Hades,

are staying in an “elegant hotel” with “marble columns” (*TLO* 194) and Maria, whose father was a diplomat in Washington, is described as wearing “a black dress, gloves and a black veiled hat like a star from an old 1940s movie” (*TLO* 194). The descriptions demonstrate that Nico’s family is affluent. Even after Maria dies, Nico does not need to worry about finances because Hades continues to support Nico and Bianca by arranging for them to be enrolled in a military school, for example. Nico does not seem to lose his status as an upper- or middle-class person even when he runs away from Camp Half-Blood and starts travelling on his own because he is never seen struggling with money. Thus, he is not subjected to the intertwined oppression of being both lower class and queer.

While queer characters of colour and of lower-class status are rare in children’s literature, queer characters with disabilities are non-existent (Epstein 182). Both Alex and Nico are able-bodied, thus perpetuating the homonormative view that queer people cannot also be people with physical disabilities. In addition, Epstein includes learning difficulties in her list of disabilities that are missing from queer representations (182). In the Percy Jackson universe, most demigods have dyslexia and/or ADHD, but it is unclear whether Nico has them as well because it is never shown explicitly. It is a missed opportunity to rectify the absence of queer characters with learning difficulties in children’s fiction.

4.2.3. Queer Time

In *In a Queer Time and Place*, Judith Halberstam introduces the concept of “queer time” (1) which one enters when they stray from the heteronormatively accepted life trajectory of “bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (6). This means the goal of finding a steady job, marrying, having children and living a long life in a house with a white picket fence that most people are expected to strive for. Failing to follow this pre-scripted life path transforms one into a “queer subject” (Halberstam 10). Queer subjects

are not only people with non-normative gender and sexual identities who reject the heteronormative idea of family and marriage, but can also be people who are homeless or unemployed, for example (Halberstam 10). In this section, it will be examined whether Nico and Alex can be regarded as queer subjects who enter queer time, thus challenging heteronormative opinions concerning the characteristics of a good life.

As mentioned by Halberstam, one of the expectations of a heteronormatively accepted life is risk/safety (6), where safety is the desirable outcome. Neither Alex nor Nico have the security of a heteronormative life. Alex, for example, is a homeless teenager, which marks her as a queer subject because homelessness does not offer stability or safety. In addition to Alex, the narrator of the story, Magnus, is homeless before dying in the first instalment of the *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* series, *The Sword of Summer*. To have two homeless characters in novels targeted towards children brings attention to the issue that not everyone can live the heteronormatively ideal life, whether it is by force or by choice. Alex, in a sense, chooses homelessness because she could have opted for the heteronormatively accepted life and avoid being kicked out of her home if she had ignored her gender fluidity. In the flashback scene where Alex is presumably disowned, her father tells her: ““That’s all I want from you! To be a *normal* kid! Is that so damn hard?”” (*SotD* 146; emphasis original). If Alex had pretended to be “normal”, she would not have ended up on the streets. Alex defies the heteronormative standard of security by choosing her identity over having a home.

Nico is also a character who, for a time, chooses a risky life over a more secure one. While all demigods face danger because of the constant threat of monsters attacking them due to their powers, Nico’s life is even more dangerous because he leaves the only relatively safe place for Greek demigods at the end of *The Titan’s Curse* when he is only ten years old. Instead, he starts travelling by himself and training with the dead. His experience

is in stark contrast to the heteronormative expectation of safety, and is another example showing the reader that not everyone can enjoy the luxury of a home, family and education.

It is important to note, however, that both Nico and Alex eventually find a secure place that they can call home. At the end of *The Blood of Olympus*, Nico decides to stay at Camp Half-Blood, whereas Hotel Valhalla becomes Alex's home when she dies. While neither Camp Half-Blood nor Valhalla are necessarily heteronormative places — after all, young demigods train for battle in both of them, and Valhalla in particular prevents one from living a heteronormative life as will be discussed below — they are both fairly safe, offering Nico and Alex security that is expected of a heteronormative life.

After Alex dies, she becomes an einherji, which places her more firmly into queer time, despite Valhalla being a safe place for her. In fact, all the einherjar in Valhalla live in queer time because they are all technically dead, and their fate is far from normal:

Alex and I had already died. We would never age. We'd live in Valhalla until Doomsday came around (unless we got killed outside of the hotel before that). The best life we could hope for was training for Ragnarok, postponing that inevitable battle as many centuries as possible, and then, one day, marching out of Valhalla with Odin's army and dying a glorious death while the Nine Worlds burned around us. Fun. (*SotD* 13)

Halberstam argues that in Western cultures “we create longevity as the most desirable future, applaud the pursuit of long life (under any circumstances)” (4), but living an eternal life as an undead warrior of Odin until Ragnarok arrives hardly seems like one of the aims of a heteronormative life trajectory.

In addition to Alex and the other undead einherjar, Nico can also be considered to be living in queer time for the strange timeline of his life. After all, he is technically over 80 years old because he was born in the 1930s, and yet, due to having been placed in Lotus

Hotel where time passes more slowly than in the outside world, he is only fourteen years old by the end of *The Blood of Olympus*. Nico is described as “[radiating] a kind of *old* energy – a melancholy that came from knowing he didn’t belong in the modern world” (*HoH* 6; emphasis original), which emphasises how non-normative his situation is, despite the longevity of his life that heteronormativity considers desirable. Through presenting longevity in a way that seems unnatural and not entirely positive like one would expect, the reader is challenged to reassess the idea of a long life as a marker of a good life, particularly since in both series there are many characters who die young, but still manage to accomplish great feats.

Lester has listed “raising children in nuclear families” (247) as a typical way in which queer families are homonormatively portrayed to support heteronormative institutions because reproduction is one of the central expectations of a heteronormative life. While many queer couples cannot conceive children through the biological means of sexual intercourse, forming a nuclear family is still possible for them through adoption, for example. Consequently, most adult queer couples are depicted as raising children in children’s literature, which perpetuates heteronormative ideals about family life and renders queer families without children abnormal (Lester 254).

In Riordan’s work, the reproductive norm is defied, for example, through the *einherjar*. The undead warriors of Odin cannot have children (*SotD* 243), so even heterosexual couples in Valhalla cannot form a heteronormative nuclear family through reproduction, and adoption seems unlikely because living mortals are not allowed into Valhalla unless they are one of the Valkyries (*HoT* 31). Furthermore, the main characters in Riordan’s children’s fantasy fiction are mostly young teenagers for whom having children is unlikely, although that would place them into queer time as well, since teenage pregnancy is not necessarily desirable in heteronormativity. Instead, the characters in Riordan’s work

form close bonds with each other, encouraging the reader to consider that maybe friendship can be as good as familial bonds, if not better, since most of the characters have dysfunctional families. In so doing, Riordan employs children's literature's capability of "challenging politicized discourse and the espousal of prevailing middle-class family values" (Tucker and Gamble 2), and supports the forming of alternative families that differ from the traditional, heteronormative nuclear family, and the existence of which undermines the status of nuclear family as ideal (McCarthy 2).

To sum up, in this chapter I have examined the presence of heteronormativity in Rick Riordan's work by utilising the concepts of homonormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, intersectionality and queer time. I have suggested that despite being works of fantasy, Riordan's novels depict a world where heteronormativity is prevalent, much like in our current society. This is evident in the way both Nico and Alex are initially assumed to follow heteronormative expectations on gender and sexuality; Nico is thought to be straight whereas Alex's gender is presumed to be in accordance with her sex. Heteronormativity is also promoted through the homonormative portrayal of Nico in relation to the lack of intersections in his identity. Like many other queer characters, he is a white, middle- or upper-class character with no physical disabilities. Therefore, he only faces possible oppression due to his sexuality. Alex, in contrast, is a character who represents queer people with intersecting oppressed identities since she is homeless and of Mexican origin in addition to being transgender and gender fluid. Through her, Riordan challenges the homonormative tradition of portraying queer people as privileged characters if not for their sexual or gender identity. Additionally, heteronormativity is disrupted by placing both Nico and Alex into queer time where their life trajectories differ from the heteronormatively accepted one. Riordan also criticises heteronormativity by showing the negative effects it can have on queer people; Alex is physically assaulted and disowned while Nico's mental

health suffers because of internalised homophobia. All in all, heteronormativity has an unfortunate presence in the novels analysed in this thesis, but its presence also enables for it to be critiqued.

4.3. Performativity in Riordan's Work

Judith Butler has argued that gender is a performative act where one's performance constitutes the gender identity (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 33), which contests the heteronormative practice of viewing a person's gender as biologically determined, and therefore, natural. The status of the gender categories of male and female as seemingly natural is the result of continuous repetition of performances that create those identities (Robinson and Jones Díaz 139). However, since the normative categories of male and female are constructions built on certain kinds of performative acts, there is a possibility of subverting them through performances that oppose the heterosexual matrix. According to Butler, the term heterosexual matrix refers to the "grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (*Gender Trouble* 194), that is, the norms of a society. Performances that are outside of the heterosexual matrix face the risk of being mistakenly read by others, but only through those performances can one "open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 24). In this section, the possibility of dismantling heteronormativity in Riordan's work will be examined through Butler's theory of performativity. Firstly, the focus is on the subversive constructions of gender, mainly by Alex. Secondly, the concept of the closet as a performance will be introduced and utilised in order to analyse Nico's performance of a closeted gay man and how it can be seen as a critique of heterosexuality's status as the norm.

4.3.1. Performing Gender

As discussed above, in order to dismantle the heteronormative expectations of gender, one needs to perform one's gender in a way that does not fit into the heterosexual matrix, or the normative views on what men and women are supposed to look and act like. Consequently, Nico's performance of gender cannot be regarded as subversive. While Nico's performative acts do not construct a hypermasculine identity with bulky muscles and a tendency towards physical violence, he presents himself in a manner that sufficiently follows masculine norms for the other characters to read him as male, which aligns with how Nico views himself. Alex, on the other hand, can be regarded as causing "gender trouble" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 44) because her performance constitutes a gender identity that rattles the heteronormative assumptions on masculinity and femininity. In this section, I will examine the performative acts through which Alex negotiates a non-normative gender identity for herself.

The categories male and female are binary opposites that are heteronormatively viewed as having distinct characteristics. Being gender fluid, Alex constructs an identity that is in turns male and female, and yet she performs those identities all but identically; her interests, sense of humour, looks and so forth remain the same regardless of gender. At least, that is what can be assumed since Magnus does not mention any discernible changes when Alex's gender changes, other than Alex's hair possibly being slightly longer when he identifies as male (*HoT* 239). Furthermore, as has already been discussed in the chapters on stereotypes and heteronormativity, Alex dresses in a way that can confuse the one trying to read her gender. Her attire is rarely gender specific and it consists of a mix of pink and green, where pink is a traditionally female colour and green is traditionally masculine. Interestingly, Magnus likens Alex's clothes to "a jester's motley" (*HoT* 50), which would support the idea of gender as a kind of performance, since jesters are

performers. Comparing Alex's outfit to that of a jester's also suits the notion that gender can be problematised through parodic performances because "gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without origin" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 175). Parody highlights how gender is comprised of certain culturally-bound signs, the origin of which cannot be determined (Sullivan 86). While Alex is not a parodic character, the way she dresses parodies the idea that clothes can be read as a signifier of gender.

Since gender is a social construction that is "performatively constituted in and through relations with others and with a world" (Sullivan 85), Alex's gender identity does not form in a vacuum. Instead, the other characters interpret her performative acts, which consist of her clothes, actions and her looks, for example. They construct their own idea of Alex's gender by comparing her performance with the norms of the heterosexual matrix. Therefore, based on Alex's appearance, her gender-neutral name, and the prior information of her being Samirah's brother, Mallory, for example, establishes a male identity for Alex. Accordingly, she refers to Alex with the pronoun he: "He doesn't even have a weapon" (*HoT* 51). Calling a person by a name, a pronoun or any other word is an act of hailing (Finlay 63) where the person is formed "to comply with and obey the laws of its discursive or social domain" (A. Jackson 677). Mallory addresses Alex as 'he' and expects Alex to abide by the rules attached to the masculine role because "[c]onformity is the anticipated outcome [of hailing], a compulsion that regulates gender formation and that governs norms of intelligibility" (A. Jackson 677).

Alex, however, reads her own performance differently and, rather than conforming to the identity set by the hailing, she refutes Mallory's interpretation through the performative act of speaking (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xxv):

"She," Alex corrected.

“What?” Mallory asked.

“Call me *she*—unless and until I tell you otherwise.” (*HoT* 51; emphasis original)

It is through the act of speaking that Alex manages to negotiate a gender identity with the other characters that does not threaten to “undo [her] personhood” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 1) by being referred to by pronouns that contradict Alex’s own reading of her performance. Throughout the novels, Alex utilises her speech to construct a male or female identity, since her performance is otherwise at a risk of being unintelligible. For example, in *The Ship of the Dead*, she explicitly states when her gender has changed from male to female: “[...] Oh, and by the way, guys, my pronouns are *she* and *her* now. It’s a new day!” (111; emphasis original). Through every repetition of a non-normative gender identity, Alex works to subvert the heterosexual matrix that renders identities like hers unintelligible.

Butler’s theory of performativity has erroneously been interpreted by some readers as meaning that one can freely choose one’s gender and perform it however one chooses (Sullivan 87). According to this view, Alex could be read as changing her gender on a whim simply because she wants to do so. However, this voluntarist interpretation of performativity is problematic since it would render non-normative gender presentations as nothing more than parodies of gender. Furthermore, it would require a subject who consciously makes the choice, which is against Butler’s argument that it is the actions that constitute the subject (Sullivan 89). Gender, therefore, “is not something that can be put on or taken off at will” (Sullivan 89). This notion is supported in Riordan’s work as well when Alex pretends to change her gender on purpose, but immediately clarifies she cannot actually manipulate it (*HoT* 271). When Magnus asks why Alex cannot be whatever she wants because of her shape-shifting ability, Alex explains: “I can *look* like whatever or whoever I want. But my actual gender? No. I can’t change it at will. It’s truly fluid, in the sense that I

don't control it. [...]” (*HoT* 272; emphasis original). Alex cannot control her gender because it is performatively constituted; her gender identity depends on how she and others interpret her performative acts.

Through her theory of performativity, Judith Butler objects to the heteronormative view that gender is biologically determined. Instead, gender “is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 43–44). Since gender is performatively constructed through actions, it cannot be regarded as natural. In Riordan’s work, the natural-like status of gender is questioned through Jack, who is a male character. He also happens to be a sentient, talking magic sword. Since Jack has no human body that one can assign a sex to, there is no sex to biologically determine his gender. Rather, his gender is entirely constructed through speech acts: “‘*It?*’ Jack demanded. ‘Hey, lady, some respect. I’m *Sumarbrander!* The Sword of Summer! The weapon of Frey! I’ve been around for thousands of years! Also, I’m a dude!’” (*SotD* 7; emphasis original). Similarly to Alex, who objects to people reading her performative acts incorrectly, Jack resents being viewed as an inanimate object and utilises his speech to construct a male identity. Furthermore, the appearance of heterosexuality as natural is also disturbed through Jack because he performs a heterosexual identity; he exclaims that Skofnung Sword — which is an inanimate weapon, but female, according to Jack — is “so hot” (*HoT* 116; emphasis original) and he goes on dates with magical female weapons (*HoT* 44). By assigning gender and sexuality, which are heteronormatively regarded as essential, natural characteristics of a person, to objects that are decidedly unnatural, Riordan employs fantasy to dismantle heteronormativity in a way that is unattainable through non-fantasy fiction.

4.3.2. Performing the Closet

In this section, I explore the ways in which a closeted identity in Riordan's work is performed and the consequences the closet can have on a subject. The focus is on Nico, since Alex comes out of the closet through an explicit speech act, stating that she is transgender and gender fluid in the first conversation she has with Magnus (*HoT* 54).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued that a closeted identity — keeping one's queerness hidden from others — is performatively constituted: “‘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 differentially constitutes it” (3). In a heteronormative world where heterosexuality is the expected norm, the performative act of staying silent about one's queer sexuality is usually interpreted by others as constructing a heterosexual identity. Nico, for example, never alludes to his homosexuality in conversation until *The House of Hades*. Neither does he state that he is straight, but since his performance is read through the heterosexual matrix, the other characters assume his heterosexuality.

In constructing a closeted identity, silence can also refer to suppressing other performative acts than that of speaking: “[I]n his/her everyday life the so-called ‘closet case’ tries to hide the imaginary signs which he/she believes could disclose his/her gayness” (Kekki 285). For Nico, this means concealing the crush he has on Percy by acting coldly towards him. For example, when Percy thanks Nico for keeping his promise of leading the demigods to the Doors of Death at the end of *The House of Hades*, Nico's voice is “steely, guarded” (579) when he speaks. However, there are instances when Nico's actions reveal his true feelings, one of them being the afore-mentioned moment when he makes the promise for Percy because Nico “would do anything for him” (*BoO* 152). The occasions of Nico helping Percy despite seemingly hating him are not severe enough transgressions against the

heterosexual matrix for the other characters to read his performance as non-normative, but they are enough to confuse Jason, for example: “He *really* didn’t get why Nico had promised to lead the *Argo II* to Epirus if he hated Percy Jackson so much” (*HoH* 273; emphasis original). It is not until Nico’s performative act of coming out that Jason can interpret Nico’s actions as being indicative of homosexuality.

Since being in the closet is a performative act of silence, coming out requires a speech act. It can be a straightforward statement of one’s non-normative identity, as, for instance, when Alex says she is transgender and gender fluid. Alternatively, it can be a speech act that alludes to one’s queerness, which is what Nico does: “‘I had a crush on Percy,’ Nico spat. ‘That’s the truth. That’s the big secret’” (*HoH* 292). Nico does not explicitly state that he is gay, but admitting his feelings for Percy is enough to bring him out of the closet and construct a queer identity.

Regardless of the manner of coming out, it is not a singular performative act that eradicates the closet for good. Instead, every time queer people meet someone new, it “erects new closets” that require “new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure” (Sedgwick 68). Both Alex and Nico demonstrate the repetitive nature of coming out. For example, while Alex establishes her queer identity with the main cast of the *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* series in one speech act, about thirty pages later she comes out again, this time to the rest of the einherjar who have assembled in the dining hall:

“Alex, son of Loki!” Helgi began.

“*Daughter*,” Alex corrected him. “Unless I tell you otherwise, it’s daughter.”

(*HoT* 82; emphasis original)

Nico, too, has to repeat the act of coming out since Jason is the only other demigod present when Cupid forces Nico to reveal his crush on Percy. In *The Blood of Olympus*, Nico first comes out to Reyna and Coach Hedge, and, at the very end, to Percy and Annabeth.

The closet is a product of heteronormativity because it forces deviance on non-normative sexual and gender identities and perpetuates the idea that being queer is wrong. There would be no need for a closeted identity if all kinds of identities were accepted (Parker 176). Through Nico, Riordan seems to criticise heteronormativity and the closet it creates by showing what having to hide one's queerness can result in. When one is in the closet, there is a discrepancy between how one's performance is read by others and by oneself; other people interpret one's performative acts of silence through the heterosexual matrix and try to construct an image that fits into its norms, whereas the person themselves form an image of a closeted queer. The contradiction of being recognised through the expectations of heteronormativity while one does not identify with them can create a life that is "unlivable" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 4) and "undo one's personhood" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 1). Nico's personhood is literally almost undone due to this conflict, as will be discussed below.

Being in the closet is one of the factors that create an unliveable life for Nico among other demigods, the other factors being his parentage and the fact that he is from another age, which were discussed in the chapter about stereotypes. However, coming out of the closet is not an option for Nico because he is certain he will face rejection if he does so (*HoH* 428), which is another way of having one's personhood undone; after all, the act of making one's queerness recognisable for others in a heteronormative world may result in being branded as "less-than-human" (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 2), which can even lead to violence. In order to avoid revealing his sexuality and the subsequent undoing of his personhood Nico believes will follow, Nico leaves Camp Half-Blood multiple times and is determined to do so permanently after the war with Gaia.

After Nico is forced to come out of the closet in front of Jason, who, instead of rejecting Nico, is supportive of him, Nico's relationship with the closet changes. Rather than being a defensive shield against rejection, the closet gradually becomes an oppressive barrier that undoes Nico's personhood by denying him recognition as a queer person. This is symbolised by the literal undoing of Nico's physical body during the journey of transporting the statue of Athena Parthenos from Greece to Camp Half-Blood in the United States. After several shadow-travel jumps, Nico's body starts to become insubstantial to the point where Reyna's hand once passes through him "as if he were a shadow" (*BoO* 213) and he cannot always grab onto solid objects (*BoO* 277). While Nico's fading away is explained as being the result of too frequent shadow-travelling and the overexertion of his powers, it can also be read as being caused by the stress of keeping his sexuality hidden and by the conflict where Reyna and Coach Hedge view him as heterosexual based on his performance whereas Nico himself has constructed an identity of a closeted gay man.

The turning point for Nico happens after a talk with Reyna where he tells her: "Your voice is your identity. If you don't use it [...] you're halfway to Asphodel already" (*BoO* 281). The words are targeted towards Reyna who is unwilling to discuss her family, but they apply to Nico as well; by refusing to use his voice to perform the speech act of coming out, Nico has doomed himself to fading away. The conversation is intercepted by another demigod, Bryce, who is under orders to capture Reyna for treason. He overhears Reyna's confession of killing his father's spirit, which would count as patricide under Roman law and for which she would be executed (*BoO* 287). Bryce says that he "can't wait until [Reyna's] little secret comes out" (*BoO* 293), which triggers Nico, who has been hiding in the closet for years in order to keep his sexuality a secret, to unleash a wave of painful memories on Bryce and the others with the challenge: "*You want secrets? Here*" (*BoO* 294; emphasis original). The memories include the encounter with Cupid, and the memory of

Nico's past self confessing his crush on Percy functions as the speech act that brings Nico out of the closet to Reyna and Coach Hedge. However, the recognition of his identity seems to come too late since Nico loses almost all substance after turning Bryce into a ghost and banishing him to the Underworld, but with the help of Reyna and Coach Hedge, Nico is nurtured back to health. The acceptance Nico receives from the other two encourages Nico to be more open about his sexuality, which is demonstrated at the end of *The Blood of Olympus* when he comes out to Percy and Annabeth without it causing any emotional turmoil for him.

Showing the undoing of Nico's personhood that being in the closet causes is a critique on heteronormativity because it reveals how the heterosexual matrix can create an unliveable life for those who cannot live by its expectations. It can also encourage young readers to think twice before they assume someone's sexuality or gender identity. Furthermore, the acceptance shown by other characters towards both Alex and Nico when they come out of the closet may function as a catalyst for queer readers to perform the speech act of coming out to their friends and family, and the subsequent proliferation of queer identities would work to subvert heterosexuality and gender conformity as the norm.

To summarise, Butler's theory of performativity has been utilised in this chapter in order to identify the non-normative ways in which Nico and Alex perform gender and sexuality. I have shown that Alex undoes normative expectations on gender by constructing a gender-fluid identity as she shifts between the male and female gender, thus disrupting the notion that gender is biologically determined from one's sex. Since Alex's gender presentation does not change when her gender shifts, the construction of a male or female identity occurs through the performative act of speaking when she interacts with other characters. The performative nature of the closet has also been examined by focusing on Nico and the ways in which he keeps quiet about his sexuality. Furthermore, the literal

undoing of Nico's personhood caused by the overexertion of his powers is understood to symbolise the undoing of one's personhood that being in the closet can cause. By including a character who causes gender trouble through her gender performance as well as showing the negative consequences being read through the heterosexual matrix can have on a queer individual, Riordan criticises heteronormativity and encourages the reader to perform gender and sexuality in non-normative ways.

5. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined the ways in which heteronormativity is challenged as well as endorsed in the following children's fantasy book series by Rick Riordan: *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, *The Heroes of Olympus*, and *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard*. The amount of source material may seem extensive for a study of this scope, but by limiting the analysis primarily on the sexual and gender identities of Nico di Angelo and Alex Fierro, the extent of researchable material was significantly reduced, particularly as neither Nico nor Alex is the main protagonist of their respective series. Through the analysis of these characters from a queer perspective, it can be concluded that while the novels uphold heteronormativity and heteronormative views on queer people to a certain extent, they, nevertheless, present queer characters in ways that challenge heteronormativity. The subversion of heteronormativity is important because it would enable the existence of non-normative identities without the fear of discrimination, bullying, or violence. Through his novels, Riordan shows that literature can help in achieving that goal.

The thesis started with an introduction that explained the aims of the thesis as well as provided a brief summary of the works analysed. This was followed by a chapter that presented the theoretical framework of the thesis. Since the topic of the thesis is the dismantling of heteronormativity through gender and sexuality, I chose queer theory — the concepts of homonormativity and performativity, more specifically — as the lens through which to examine Riordan's novels, supplemented by the concept of stereotyping. The chapter after the theoretical framework defined children's literature and fantasy fiction, as well as discussed the presence of heteronormativity in the genres. Furthermore, previous research on gender and sexuality in children's and fantasy literature was examined before moving on to the analysis, the findings of which will be presented next.

The analysis section was divided into three sections, the first of which dealt with stereotypes. I aimed to examine how different queer stereotypes manifest themselves in Riordan's work, regarding how Nico and Alex look and act, what kind of roles they are given in the story, and whether the plots are limited to the stereotypical coming-out narrative. The findings are mostly positive: both Nico and Alex subvert many of the stereotypes forced on queer people, which is a way to challenge heteronormativity because heteronormativity produces the stereotypes assigned to minority groups. For example, the way Nico looks and acts differs considerably from the stereotypical portrayal of gay men as either feminine or hypermasculine. He is also depicted as a character who is granted multiple roles and plots in the overall story. However, towards the end of *The Heroes of Olympus*, his story transforms into a stereotypical coming-out narrative, which is an unfortunate setback in his portrayal because it adds to the large number of stories where coming out is depicted as stressful. Alex, on the other hand, is not included in a plot that revolves around her closeted status and the subsequent act of coming out because she announces her transgender and gender-fluid identity immediately. Furthermore, she becomes Magnus's, who is the protagonist of the story, love interest, which is a role not often given to transgender characters. Alex, however, is stereotypical in the way she acts because she brings attention to her queerness and lectures the other characters on gender issues, which transforms the novels into didactic books where queerness is considered an issue that the readers need to be educated on.

In the second section, my aim was to look for ways in which hetero- and homonormativity are endorsed or confronted in the novels. I discovered that Riordan has not utilised fantasy genre's potential to imagine worlds where heteronormativity could be non-existent since, for example, compulsory heterosexuality, which is a product of heteronormativity, is present in the novels. This is evident in the way both Nico and Alex are assumed to identify with normative gender and sexual identities. In addition, the novels

sustain homonormative portrayals of queer characters through the lack of intersections found particularly in Nico's identity. In contrast, Alex can be seen to face multiple forms of oppression due to being homeless, of Mexican origin, and queer. Furthermore, Riordan opposes homonormative queer representations by placing Nico and Alex into queer time.

Finally, I employed Judith Butler's theory of performativity in order to identify subversive gender presentations and to examine the performative nature of the closet. Based on the findings, it can be argued that both Nico and Alex are undoing heteronormativity through their performative acts. Alex causes gender trouble by performing gender in a non-normative manner; her gender presentation does not change even when her gender shifts from female to male and vice versa. Consequently, she fights against the heterosexual matrix that decrees which gender performances are intelligible. Nico, on the other hand, undoes heteronormativity by being literally almost undone due to staying in the closet, which is constituted through the performative act of silence and which is a result of heteronormativity. In order to construct an identity that does not fit into the heterosexual matrix, both Nico and Alex utilise the performative act of speaking, which is the most effective way of avoiding illegibility when one's sexual or gender presentation does not align with heteronormative expectations.

Due to the limited length of this thesis, I could not include Riordan's *The Trials of Apollo* series in the analysis, although it would undoubtedly have provided new perspectives to the discussion as it features the first confirmed bisexual protagonist in Riordan's work. Therefore, there is room for further research on Riordan's children's fantasy fiction from a queer perspective in order to cover the gaps left by this thesis. Furthermore, Riordan's novels would provide fruitful material for studies on representation from other angles than that of sexuality and gender because particularly his more recent novels feature characters who belong to minority groups due to their race/ethnicity, for example. While

reviewing previous research on the topic of sexuality and gender in children's literature as well as fantasy fiction, I also found out that there seems to be no extensive study that concentrates on the representation of sexual and gender minorities specifically in children's fantasy literature. It could be an area worth researching; to examine whether children's fantasy fiction generally utilises the fantasy genre's capacity to imagine new worlds where gender and sexuality are not bound by heteronormative assumptions, or whether heteronormativity is so intrinsically linked with our culture that not even the literature of the impossible can conceive a world where it does not exist.

Works Cited

- Attebery, Brian. *Strategies of Fantasy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992. Print.
- Balay, Anne. “‘Incloseto Putbacko’: Queerness in Adolescent Fantasy Fiction.” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45.5 (2012): 923–942. Print.
- Bould, Mark, and Sherryl Vint. “Political Readings.” *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. Ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 102–112. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- . *Undoing Gender*. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Carroll, Rachel. *Rereading Heterosexuality: Feminism, Queer Theory and Contemporary Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012. EBSCOhost. Web.
- Cart, Michael, and Christine A. Jenkins. *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969–2004*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2006. Print.
- “Children’s Series.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 28 April 2019. Web.
- Collins, Patricia H., and Sirma Bilge. *Intersectionality*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016. Print.
- Doughty, Amie A. “Gaea’s Last Stand: Uneasy Environmentalism in Rick Riordan’s *The Heroes of Olympus*.” *Children’s and Young Adult Literature and Culture: A Mosaic of Criticism*. Ed. Amie A. Doughty. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016. 168–182. Print.
- Dyer, Richard. *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.

- Epstein, B.J. *Are the Kids All Right? The Representation of LGBTQ Characters in Children's and Young Adult Literature*. Bristol: HammerOn Press, 2013. Print.
- Finlay, Toby. "Non-Binary Performativity: A Trans-Positive Account of Judith Butler's Queer Theory." *Laurier Undergraduate Journal of the Arts* 4 (2017): 59–69. Print.
- Gauntlett, David. *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Ginger, Stelle. "Loyalty, Honor, and Death in Rick Riordan's *Olympus* Series." *Global Perspectives on Death in Children's Literature*. Ed. Lesley D. Clement and Leyli Jamali. New York: Routledge, 2016. 35–46. Print.
- Glasner, Lily. "Taking a Zebra to Vegas: Allegorical Reality in the *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* Series." *Collision of Realities: Establishing Research on the Fantastic in Europe*. Ed. Lars Schmeink and Astrid Böger. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2012. 155–174. Print.
- Gopalakrishnan, Ambika. "Introduction to Multicultural Children's Literature." *Multicultural Children's Literature: A Critical Issues Approach*. Ed. Ambika Gopalakrishnan. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2011. 3–20. EBSCOhost. Web.
- Gustines, George G. "A Romantic Comedy About a Gay Teenager? What Took So Long?" *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 14 March 2018. Web.
- Halberstam, Judith. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press, 2005. Print.
- Hall, Stuart. "The Spectacle of the 'Other'." *Representation*. Ed. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon. London: SAGE Publications, 2013. 215–271. Print.

- Hermann-Wilmarth, Jill M., and Caitlin L. Ryan. "Queering Chapter Books with LGBT Characters for Young Readers: Recognizing and Complicating Representations of Homonormativity." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 37.6 (2016): 846–866. Print.
- Jackson, Alecia Y. "Performativity Identified." *Qualitative Inquiry* 10.5 (2004): 673–690. Print.
- Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2003. EBSCOhost. Web.
- James, Edward, and Farah Mendlesohn. "Introduction." *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. Ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 1–4. Print.
- Kekki, Lasse. *From Gay to Queer: Gay Male Identity in Selected Fiction by David Leavitt and in Tony Kushner's Play Angels in America I-II*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2003. Print.
- Klages, Mary. *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum, 2006. EBSCOhost. Web.
- Lehtonen, Sanna. "'I'm Glad I was Designed': Un/Doing Gender and Class in Susan Price's 'Odin Trilogy'." *Children's Literature in Education* 43 (2012): 242–259. Print.
- Lester, Jasmine Z. "Homonormativity in Children's Literature: An Intersectional Analysis of Queer-Themed Picture Books." *Journal of LGBT Youth* 11.3 (2014): 244–275. Print.
- Mallan, Kerry. "(Un)doing Gender." *What Do We Tell the Children?: Critical Essays on Children's Literature*. Ed. Ciara Ní Bhroin and Patricia Kennon. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. 12–25. EBSCOhost. Web.

- McCarthy, Desmond F. *Reconstructing the Family in Contemporary American Fiction*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1998. Print.
- Meyer, Ilan H., and Laura Dean. "Internalized Homophobia, Intimacy, and Sexual Behavior Among Gay and Bisexual Men." *Stigma and Sexual Orientation: Understanding Prejudice Against Lesbians, Gay Men and Bisexuals*. Ed. Gregory M. Herek. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998. N. pag. EBSCOhost. Web.
- Monleón, José B. *A Spectre Is Haunting Europe: A Sociohistorical Approach to the Fantastic*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. EBSCOhost. Web.
- Monro, Surya. *Gender Politics*. London: Pluto Press, 2005. ProQuest Ebook Central. Web.
- Nikolajeva, Maria. "The Development of Children's Fantasy." *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. Ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 50–61. Print.
- Ní Bhroin, Ciara, and Patricia Kennon. "Introduction." *What Do We Tell the Children? Critical Essays on Children's Literature*. Ed. Ciara Ní Bhroin and Patricia Kennon. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. 1–9. EBSCOhost. Web.
- Parker, Robert D. *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.
- Riordan, Rick. *The Battle of the Labyrinth*. London: Puffin Books, 2008. Print. *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* Book Four.
- . *The Blood of Olympus*. London: Puffin Books, 2014. Print. *The Heroes of Olympus* Book Five.
- . *The Hammer of Thor*. New York: Disney Hyperion, 2016. Print. *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* Book Two.

- . *The House of Hades*. London: Puffin Books, 2013. Print. *The Heroes of Olympus* Book Four.
- . *The Last Olympian*. London: Puffin Books, 2009. Print. *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* Book Five.
- . *The Mark of Athena*. London: Puffin Books, 2012. Print. *The Heroes of Olympus* Book Three.
- . *The Ship of the Dead*. New York: Disney Hyperion, 2017. Print. *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* Book Three.
- . *The Son of Neptune*. London: Puffin Books, 2011. Print. *The Heroes of Olympus* Book Two.
- . *The Titan's Curse*. London: Puffin Books, 2007. Print. *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* Book Three.
- Robbins, Ruth. *Literary Feminisms*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. Print.
- Robinson, Kerry H., and Criss Jones Díaz. *Diversity and Difference in Early Childhood Education: Issues for Theory and Practice*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006. ProQuest Ebook Central. Web.
- Sedgwick, Eve K. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. Print.
- Shelton, Jama. "Transgender Youth Homelessness: Understanding Programmatic Barriers Through the Lens of Cisgenderism." *Children and Youth Services Review* 59 (2015): 10–18. Print.
- Siebler, Kay. "Transqueer Representations and How We Educate." *Journal of LGBT Youth* 7.4 (2010): 320–345. Print.
- Simon, Angela. "The Relationship Between Stereotypes of and Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gays." *Stigma and Sexual Orientation: Understanding Prejudice Against*

Lesbians, Gay Men and Bisexuals. Ed. Gregory M. Herek. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998. N. pag. EBSCOhost. Web.

Sullivan, Nikki. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. New York: New York University Press, 2003. Print.

Tucker, Nicholas, and Nikki Gamble. *Family Fictions*. London: Continuum, 2001. EBSCOhost. Web.