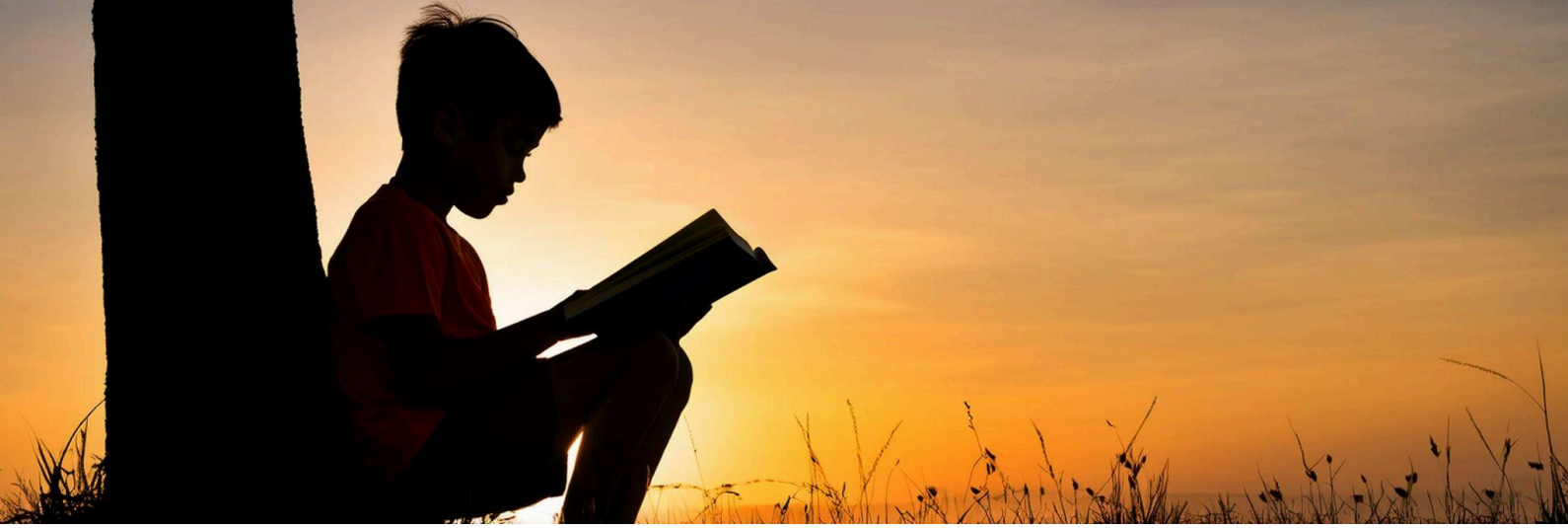

Henderson, Alex, 'The trickster figure in queer YA: A case study of Margaret Owen's *Little Thieves*'
Leaf Journal, Volume 3, Issue 1, Jul 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/7akp-4336
URL: https://ojs.library.lancs.ac.uk/lj/index

The Trickster Figure in Queer YA: A Case Study of Margaret Owen's *Little Thieves*

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Abstract
As scholars such as Helena Bassil-Morozow have explored, the trickster character type—with its roots in mythology, folklore, and oral storytelling traditions—has been constantly reinvented and remixed in the context of contemporary literature and pop culture. The themes of liminality, marginality, shape-changing, and questioning authority with a playful and rebellious sense of humour, mean that the trickster may be especially at home in work aimed at adolescent readers, particularly those of marginalised identities. The emerging space of queer Young Adult (YA) literature is thus a vibrant storytelling landscape for trickster characters and trickster tales.
This paper explores the queer trickster characteristics of Vanja, the anti-heroine of Margaret Owen's *Little Thieves*. Vanja is a young, queer, marginal figure, her character arc concerned with agency and autonomy. She uses shapeshifting magic and clever subterfuge to impersonate nobility and steal from the rich, transgressing the borders of wealth and class, all while offering the reader a critique of the power structures and entitled individuals that support this social divide. Vanja's liminality, humour, and eventual emergence as an (accidental) folk hero mark her as a queer teenage trickster protagonist and an effective example of the potential in this storytelling space.

Keywords: *creative writing for young people, young adult, queer fiction, trickster, queer young adult, liminality, character archetypes*

*

> There are maidens three: a loyal maid, a bride in her crown, a thief at the gallows.
> Which of the maidens was I?
>
> *Margaret Owens, Little Thieves*

With its roots in mythology and oral storytelling traditions, the trickster is a character type that writers consistently return to. The most recognisable trickster figures include the Norse Loki, the Greek Hermes, the West African Anansi, the Polynesian Maui, and the various versions of the Coyote, Raven, and Hare characters that appear in North American First Nations storytelling. As many media scholars argue, these have since been joined by trickster characters in novels, films, television, and video games, with their exact methods and context changing while the core components and narrative functions of the trickster remain. Helena Bassil-Morozow defines the distinction thus: '[w]hereas mythological tricksters fight with personified representations of the deterministic principle—Zeus, Thor, Odin—[contemporary] tricksters attempt to cause socio-political Ragnarök' (2012, p.123). This idea of 'socio-political Ragnarök' is crucial to the trickster's resonance (Ruberg, 2019) as a liminal, playful, rebellious figure that may be applied in various artistic contexts, and may appeal deeply to modern audiences.

As I have argued in my doctoral thesis and explored in my own creative experiments (Henderson, 2023), queer Young Adult (YA) fiction is a contemporary media space to which the trickster lends itself well. In this article I attempt to define the admittedly slippery figure of the trickster, map the traits and storytelling functions that make a character fit the archetype, and explore the thematic intersections that make the trickster right at home in queer YA. For illustration, I discuss Margaret Owen's 2021 fantasy novel *Little Thieves* and its tricksterish protagonist, Vanja, as an effective case study of how YA authors can play in this space and make use of this character type to tell cathartic, morally complex, and fun stories that resonate with a young, marginalised audience.

Tricksters, Past and Present

The trickster is often tricky to define; William J. Hynes even suggests that '[t]he sheer richness of the trickster phenomena can easily lead one to conclude that the trickster is indefinable' (1993b, p.33). What makes a trickster may vary across disciplines as well as across individual scholars: the language of 'tricksters' as a sociological and anthropological archetype has been invoked to describe psychological impulses (Jung, 1959), the energy of places (Waddell, 2010), and even psychic phenomena (Hansen,

2001). This article focuses on the trickster as a literary character type, drawing from its origins in mythology.

Trickster in its current conceptualisation as a character type derives from the work of structuralist mythographers and anthropologists working throughout the mid-twentieth century, including Paul Radin (1955), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958), and Mary Douglas (1966). However, these foundational scholars have been subject to significant critique. Later writers have especially scrutinised the tendency to homogenise cultural storytelling traditions in the name of formulating a 'universal' cross-cultural archetype. Doty and Hynes identify the key problem with Radin's approach as his 'treatment of "the trickster" in simplified and accultural terms' (1993, p.17), and Michael P. Carroll notes the 'incorrect ethnographic generalizations' that underpin some of Lévi-Strauss' analyses (1981, p.302). Anne Douhei reminds readers that a power imbalance is inherent when the storytelling traditions of so-called primitive cultures, in many cases indigenous peoples who have been subject to colonisation, are catalogued and 'explained' through the lens of white scholarship. The definitions developed in the trickster studies of the 1950s and 1960s were largely informed by, and inextricable from, 'Western conceptions of the sacred and profane, of myth and literature, and of origin, evolution, and degeneration' (Douhei, 1993, p.195). While any subsequent academic discussion of the trickster owes its existence to the works of the structuralist mythographers, it is important to recognise the colonial mindset that underlines many early conceptions of the trickster and work to build more nuanced and flexible contemporary studies of the character type.

More recently, the trickster also appears outside its mythic origins: '[f]or centuries [the trickster] has, in his various incarnations, run, flown, galloped, and most recently motorcycled through the literary imagination' (Babcock-Abrahams, 1975, p.158). Scholars like Lori Landay and Helena Bassil-Morozow study the trickster in the context of contemporary media, and suggest that this character type, and the thematic and narrative function it represents, has evolved to suit and reflect the anxieties, restrictions, and taboos of the social framework in which the stories are produced. While the label of trickster can thus cover a wide variety of storytelling contexts and, by its very nature, may 'confound categorisation' (Babcock-Abrahams, 1975, p.165), there remains a central set of thematic roles and character traits that qualify a character for trickster status under my analysis.

These traits often include some combination of the following: shapeshifting and transformation, troublemaking and trick-playing, existing on and crossing established boundaries (social or literal), embodying irony and paradox (e.g., being simultaneously clever and foolish), breaking taboos, troubling established binaries and categories, and a sense of playful, cheeky, and inappropriate humour. Tricksters are not necessarily bound within good or evil: they are '*a*moral, not *im*moral' (Hyde, 1998, p.10, emphasis in original), and their antics 'can be malicious, playful or heroic—and sometimes all three at once' (Bassil-Morozow, 2015, p.16). They serve as 'simultaneously a selfish-buffoon and a culture hero' (Carroll, 1984, p.125) in their stories, wielding their

wits as their greatest weapon, yet also subject to failure and hubris when their clever transgression gets them in trouble.

As well as not sitting neatly within black-and-white moral codes, the trickster never sits neatly within their story-world's power structures. So entangled is the trickster with this marginal, underdog status that Lewis Hyde asserts '[i]f trickster were to ever get power, he would stop being a trickster' (1998, p.13). Because they are outside the dominant sphere, tricksters are uniquely positioned to question, trouble, and sometimes even break these power structures. Consistent to most typologies is the notion 'that the trickster figure serves as a chaos-inducing element intent on challenging the order of things' (Bassil-Morozow, 2015, p.11) and, regardless of context, that 'trickster figures are representations of liminality, duality, subversion, and irony' (Landay, 1998, p.2). These themes resonate through both the characterisation of a trickster and their role in the narrative.

In terms of narrative function, Bassil-Morozow suggests that:

> the trickster represents an unpredictable element which is introduced into an existing order of things, then challenges or demolishes this order, and the new order is introduced at the end of the narrative—often after the trickster's disappearance. (2017, p.86)

Terrie Waddell similarly defines a trickster by their story role as 'an archetypal agent of change' (2010, p.1). Often, tricksters star in 'stealing fire from the gods' narratives in which they bring benefits to humankind either heroically or by accident, '[managing] to break a given taboo, pass on the relative cultural gift, and deflect respective punishment from the recipients of the cultural benefit onto himself' (Hynes, 1993a, p.213). Their 'anarchic assault on the status quo' (Lock, 2002, n.p.) may take many forms, but tricksters are tied to thematic narratives about challenging norms and breaking rules, using their positionality on the threshold of a power structure to topple (or at least make trouble for) it, often for the benefit of those disempowered by that structure.

Most importantly, said anarchic assault on the status quo is also 'fun' (Lock, 2002, n.p.). Trickster tales not only feature the laughter of the trickster themself, but encourage the audience to laugh along too, often at scathing satire of the story's systemic power: because '[to] defy the system is to laugh at it, and laughter is the trickster's main tool' (Bassil-Morozow, 2015, p.4). Bassil-Morozow describes the trickster as 'the raw energy of the new struggling to break through the surface of old structures' (2015, p.31) to create a 'new order […] born out of mischief and play' (p.20 – 21).

The Teenage Trickster

Of the many literary forms and functions of a contemporary trickster, I argue that it is a character type that has potentially rich applications in stories of queer adolescence,

and with narratives of queer adolescent rebellion. A trickster is, as well as being characterised by their mischief and playfulness, characterised by being an in-between figure: positioned to cross established boundaries and binaries, defined by their outsider status relative to the dominant power structures of whatever world they inhabit. Because, at their heart, 'Young Adult novels are about power' (Trites, 2000, p.3), texts in the field of queer YA fiction often understandably find themselves concerned with the crossroads of marginality that LGBTQIA+ teenagers face and the intersecting net of power relations they must navigate. Systems of adult authority mean that teenagers are 'by design deprived of civil rights and infantilized' (Gill-Peterson, 2018, p.2), lacking legal and economic agency as well as caught in the marginal space between the socially-constructed borders of childhood and adulthood (Waller, 2009; Auten, 2020). The established structure that marks heterosexuality and cisgender identity as the norm, and the social, medical, and legal structures that accompany it, further systemically disempowers queer teenagers.

A major connection between trickster narrative and adolescent narrative is the notion of liminality. This phrase was popularised by anthropologist Victor Turner, drawing from and elaborating on Arnold van Gennep's 'liminaire' (1909) from his ethnographic studies of rites of passage in preindustrial societies (Joseph, 2011, p.138). 'Liminality', as Turner coins it, is the middle state in the coming-of-age ritual: a state of being that is 'ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification' (Turner, 1974, p.232). While it refers to a specific anthropological concept, the language of liminality can be, and has been, mapped onto many different disciplines, including literary studies. Many scholars have applied the language and frameworks of liminality to the analysis of adolescent literature (Bigger, 2010; Joseph, 2011; Wilkinson, 2015; Hayes, 2018; Auten, 2020). In a contemporary context, adolescence is 'often perceived as liminal, in transition, and in constant growth' and thus 'always "other" to the more mature stage of adulthood' (Waller, 2009, p.1). In this transitory otherness, a variety of contradictions present themselves, ripe for YA narratives to explore (Bowden, 2021, p.66).

Lori Landay defines the pop cultural tricksters within her study by 'their pursuit of autonomy' (1998, p.30), and Terrie Waddell defines a trickster by their story role as 'an archetypal agent of change' (2010, p.1). These themes of autonomy, change, and power are also central to Young Adult fiction. Across their journeys, YA protagonists typically develop 'an increasing awareness of the institutions constructing the individual' (Trites, 2000, p.19); often coming to interrogate and problematise these social constructions along the way (p.20). As well as lending itself well to narratives that interrogate power structures, a young, queer trickster character provides an avenue for queer agency in this narrative context. A queer teenager is an especially liminal, vulnerable character, and there is narrative pleasure and catharsis in the suggestion that marginalised characters deserve autonomy over themselves and the settings they inhabit. Not only that, but they may be the ones uniquely situated to change the world—not in the mode of a traditional heroic character type, but through

the more ambiguous, rebellious, clever and funny figure of trickster. YA fiction is thus a playful creative space in which the antics of a trickster character may draw attention to structural inequalities and harmful systems, all through a fantastical and playful narrative mode that has the potential to resonate strongly with a similarly-marginalised audience.

Because of this concern with power and agency, YA narratives—particularly queer ones—present themselves as an optimal place for familiar power (im)balances to be turned topsy-turvy and interrogated in ways that will satisfy their audiences. These are conventions that lend themselves well to tricksters. Kylee Auten argues that, especially in YA literature, 'play and liminality are intricately intertwined' (2020, p.6), and 'liminal characters use play to […] subvert authority figures' (p.2). In a sense, a tricksterish subversion of the expected order is built into the conventions of the YA demographic. As Stephen Bigger writes,

> the liminality betwixt and between childhood and adulthood features in fiction for young people. Turner talked of circumstances turned upside down, carnival-style; in a similar way, dependent children are described in story as independent, even world redeemers. (2010, p.3)

Adolescence is a liminal period rife with struggles for agency and self-determination, and YA fiction provides a space for that to be narrativised and explored in a rewarding way. YA is also a demographic in which there is more room for moral complexity and ambiguity, where 'heroes' and 'villains' are not necessarily as clean-cut of a binary as in works for younger audiences. The way YA narratives frequently problematise default adult authority also leaves room for questioning other complex social binaries. Into this framework, there is room for tricksters to emerge as YA culture-heroes: Hyde's '*a*moral, not *im*moral' characters (see above), representing taboo and existence outside the parent-approved circle, and ready to mock and displace the authorities that teenage protagonists (and teenage readers) are beginning to interrogate. And, as Lock emphasises in her 2002 paper, we cannot understate the fact that tricksters are *fun*. Their mischief and the ways in which it destabilises structure provides escapism, empowerment, and darkly humorous social commentary to young queer readers who may be worn down by their own lack of agency in a chaotic world—potentially a new form of the trickster tale's function as 'a ritual vent for social frustrations' (Hynes, 1993a, p.206).

Trickster characters appear in various forms and contexts across YA. Some authors draw on their own cultural traditions: for example, the *Trickster* trilogy (2017 – 2021) by Haisla and Heiltsuk First Nations member Eden Robinson who draws on First Nations North American storytelling practices, as does Lipan Apache author Darcie Little Badger in *A Snake Falls to Earth* (2021). YA has also seen multiple retellings and remixes of the Norse trickster figure Loki, including as the queer protagonist of Mackenzi Lee's Marvel Cinematic Universe tie-in novel, *Where Mischief Lies* (2019).

Alongside these more traditionally-recognisable tricksters, however, are original characters with trickster attributes: mischievous, marginal figures who serve as 'an archetypal agent of change' (Waddell 2010, p.1) within their stories. These queer adolescents, pushed to the margins in their narrative contexts, ultimately attempt and achieve what the audience 'cannot or dare not' (Landay, 1998, p.xi) in a speculative context, all with a mischievous and often sarcastic sense of humour in both the dialogue and the narration. A queer YA work that effectively demonstrates these elements—and provides a potential blueprint for writers attempting to play in the same space—is Margaret Owen's *Little Thieves.*

Little Tricksters in *Little Thieves*

Vanja, the protagonist and narrator of *Little Thieves*, is a queer YA protagonist who embodies trickster traits and demonstrates their appeal within this genre/demographic space. Abandoned by her biological mother and adopted by the Low Gods of Death and Fortune, Vanja begins the novel deep in a magical identity-theft scam. Seizing an opportunity to escape the abusive von Falbirg household where she works as a maid, Vanja steals an enchanted pearl necklace and uses it to physically transform, impersonating the house's daughter, Princess Gisele. Vanja has been using this disguise to rob the nobility, but a heist goes awry when she offends a forest god. Her (initially selfish) schemes to try and end her curse lead Vanja to uncovering, and then unravelling, a magical conspiracy helmed by Gisele's abusive, warmongering fiancé Adalbrecht.

Immediately, the use of shapeshifting and subterfuge, her liminal position between the worlds of gods and mortals, and the undermining of a much more powerful figure, align Vanja with the trickster type. Following Bassil-Morozow's definitions, Vanja 'can be malicious, playful or heroic—and sometimes all three at once' (2015, p.16), coming reluctantly into her heroism and then vanishing from the narrative once her good work is done. More thematically, Vanja's narrative and characterisation hinge on the key aspects of liminality, autonomy, boundary-crossing, playful mischief, and social critique. Her youth and her queer identity intersect with her trickster traits to make her a marginal, underdog figure that young readers may identify with, offering catharsis and 'a ritual vent for social frustrations' (Hynes, 1993a, p.206) when she ultimately undermines the systemic structures that have harmed her.

Little Thieves is the first in a trilogy, followed by *Painted Devils* (2023) and *Holy Terrors* (2025), with a series of short stories called *The Fallow Year* (published from late 2023 to early 2025 on Margaret Owen's *Archive of Our Own* account) intended to connect the latter two novels. Vanja's tricksterish qualities continue throughout the series, and indeed she leans more deliberately into her trickster role as the story progresses. However, for the sake of focus and brevity this article will focus on Vanja's characterisation and antics within *Little Thieves*, which functions somewhat as a standalone narrative.

Little Thieves qualifies as 'queer YA' because of its central LGBTQIA+ characters. Protagonist Vanja is on the asexual spectrum, as is her rival and eventual love interest Emeric. While this terminology is not used directly in the novel, Owen has spoken of her characters as 'asexual-spectrum kids' (Milas, 2023). Additionally, the characters are coded as asexual through dialogue and through Vanja's internal narration, where she describes her disinterest in sex; which, crucially, seems to have been present throughout her life and is never conflated with the trauma from Adalbrecht attempting to sexually assault her. Vanja's growing attraction to Emeric as the two become emotionally closer has led some commentators to read both Vanja and Emeric as demisexual specifically, including YA author and editor Rosiee Thor, who declares that this relationship 'could not be more demisexual if it tried, with both sides of the romance experiencing asexual spectrum existence in different and complimentary ways' (Thor, 2022). Alongside Vanja, *Little Thieves* gradually gathers a queer ensemble cast, including Ragne, the shapeshifting daughter of the god who curses Vanja; a fellow servant who mentions his husband (Owen, 2021, p.511); and Gisele herself, who enters a romantic relationship with Ragne by the end of the novel.

The marginality of the characters—especially Vanja—also lends the story a thematic queerness. Vanja is a liminal figure with a multiplicity of identities, caught in several liminal positions: a mortal with a connection to the gods, a servant who is friends with a princess. The novel's card game motif highlights that Vanja can slip between identities—princess, maid, thief—with the right use of sleight of hand. She is also a teenager, and as per the laws of the setting, is not an autonomous adult until age seventeen (this law is a plot point in the growing conspiracy around Adalbrecht's politically-motivated betrothal to Gisele, helpfully highlighting Vanja's own age and lack of autonomy to the audience). Vanja's main drive is a ruthless, scheming quest for her own agency, striving for a life where she can escape servitude (to the nobles *and* to her godmothers) and determine her own fate. Vanja also occasionally breaks the fourth wall and cheekily addresses the reader, for example when she teases 'And I *know* you're wondering how we pulled this one off. Fine, since you've been so patient, I'll tell you just this once' (p.576) during the novel's climax. This kind of playful metanarrative device is also a common trickster trait (Hynes, 1993; Henderson, 2023) and draws a direct line from the trickster anti-hero to the adolescent reader, inviting them to relate and resonate with Vanja.

When the reader meets her, she is orchestrating a carefully-plotted heist. She employs literal, magical shapeshifting with the enchanted pearls; but also a more social shapeshifting by slipping across the supposedly defined and immutable borders of class. Not only does she infiltrate the nobility, she deliberately mocks them, exploiting their flaws and vices to her own gain, and choosing to scare them by leaving a red penny—a move that has earned her the folkloric reputation as the *Pfennigeist* (Penny Phantom). Vanja deliberately leaves a calling card to stir anxiety in the rich, however, as in many archetypal trickster tales, her pride causes her trouble (Carroll, 1984). Her showmanship earns her unwanted attention and she soon finds herself the target of

the Prefects, entering Vanja into a cat-and-mouse game of wits and white lies with the young investigator, Emeric.

To deflect suspicion, Vanja deliberately plays up her version of Gisele as 'a bland, unobjectionable, beautiful girl' (Owen, 2021, p.461) and as the villainous Adalbrecht's 'naïve, empty-headed teenage fiancée' (p.369). As the reader learns when they meet the real Gisele, she is nowhere near as flippant and airheaded as Vanja's version. The magic of the pearls also warps Gisele's image into something more in line with traditional feminine beauty standards, implied to be thinner and shorter than Gisele is in real life, and with her hair a much paler shade of blonde. While in a practical sense Vanja has stolen Gisele's identity, in reality her persona while wearing the pearls is a clever fabrication built on stereotypes about pretty, privileged young women. Hidden behind this façade and using its associated social expectations for misdirection, Vanja is able to get away with a great deal of mischief.

This is exemplified in an early scene I will refer to as The Dressing Gown Gambit, wherein Vanja—in disguise as 'Gisele'—is questioned by Emeric. Knowing that Emeric poses a threat to her plot, Vanja snatches what little advantage she has and invites him to conduct his interview over breakfast. She attends deliberately underdressed in a ploy to skew convention and throw Emeric off:

> I've donned slippers and pulled my hair back into a positively devilish tail dripping down one shoulder, but all I'm wearing is a rich scarlet brocade dressing gown bundled over the nightgown. It's heavy enough that I'm not worried about letting anything slip. It's still *wildly* inappropriate. A young *prinzessin* has no business receiving guests in her nightclothes. [...] Judging by the vaguely terrified transfixion of Emeric Conrad as he stares from the table set for two, he is still far, far from immune. (p.94-95)

Vanja plays into her Gisele persona, 'staring vapidly into the distance' (p.103) and playing dumb while cannily answering Emeric's questions and attempting to deflect suspicion. She sexualises herself deliberately and weaponises this taboo to distract her foe, letting her dressing gown slip off her shoulder at strategic moments. She also orders *rohtwurst* for breakfast and uses the 'fat, *extremely* suggestive red sausages' (p.98) to make both visual innuendo and veiled threats—such as when she slices the tip off, causing Emeric to turn 'very pale, then very red' (p.102). The irony of this is that Vanja is, again, asexual, and has little interest in 'someone's… *personal rohtwurst*' (p.98) by her own admission, cementing this as a clever performance drawing on an exaggerated version of the silly, flirty princess. This bawdy and ditzy performance is all in the name of tricking Emeric, very much in the tradition of the screwball comediennes in Landay's study of female tricksters (1998). Vanja happily notes his 'rewarding air of desperation' (p.102) towards the end of the meal.

The interaction climaxes when Emeric catches Vanja off guard by referring to the castle servants, and mentioning Vanja by name. Here, the text stresses Vanja's

strategically fluid identity, her marginality, and how she is ultimately, ironically, embodying a social role that has harmed her in order to secure her own safety:

> If he had asked Vanja the maid, I could have told him these families practically foster grudges in their servants, and in their subjects, and in anyone they consider beneath them, which is most of Boern. I could have told him it's their own damn fault for treating us like we're invisible, except when they treat us like toys.
>
> I could have told him where the scars on my back came from. How Irmgard von Hirsching put them there simply because she was *bored*.
>
> But sweet, vain Gisele lives in a world where only wicked creatures would resent someone like her. And Vanja… for him, Vanja is gone.
>
> So I say, "No".
>
> And then I jam my fork into the *rohtwurst*, lift the whole thing, and take a hearty, vicious bite off the end, staring Junior Prefect Emeric Conrad dead in the eye as grease rolls down my chin. (p.105-106)

This scene demonstrates Vanja's trickster tactics, but also crucially highlights how they are informed by a genuine sense of justice. While Vanja's experiences may not directly mirror those of real-world teenage readers, her visceral anger at her disempowerment as a child under the control of adults, a girl under the control of men, and a member of the working class under the control of the rich, will resonate. Her story neatly exemplifies YA fiction's potential as a space for exploring power imbalances and the unique traumas faced by marginalised young people, while also providing catharsis or even escapism to those same readers by turning these power imbalances 'upside down, carnival-style (Bigger, 2010, p.3) within the narrative and within the trickster's mockery of them. Vanja's marginal position means that she has unique insights and skills that allow her to defeat Adalbrecht—a violent, predatory man born into money, the ultimate representative of the setting's power structures, and the ultimate target for toppling by a trickster.

While Vanja is by her own admission a selfish character, she has a kind streak and ultimately emerges as a force for good—a 'culture hero' (Carroll, 1984, p.125) like other tricksters before her. For example, she uses sleight of hand to con pawnbrokers out of their money and their goods, returning a pawned wedding ring to a mourning widow, but downplaying the good deed by telling the reader she did so 'accidentally on purpose' (Owen, 2021, p.231). She also endangers her own life by retrieving money from a burning orphanage, and then leverages her connection to the Low Gods by securing safe living quarters for the children at a temple. Finally, she sacrifices herself to summon the Godly Court so they may serve justice to Adalbrecht. This element of sacrifice for the greater good of humanity is also an aspect of many trickster tales (Hynes, 1993a, p.213).

Crucially, trickster tales are rarely straightforward tragedies, and neither is Vanja's: her gambit pays off and the gods bring her back to life. With Adalbrecht successfully dethroned, Vanja maintains her plan to flee the Empire, fulfilling Bassil-Morozow's criteria that the trickster must vanish from the world once their work is done and they have successfully upturned the status quo (2017, p.86). In the novel's final scene, Vanja leaves Emeric handcuffed and playfully—fondly—invites him to catch her (Owen, 2021, p.621). Their mutual chase—and complicated romance—continues into the sequels, and Vanja leans much more consciously and determinedly into her trickster tactics. In *Painted Devils*, she realises that she '*like[s]* solving problems for good people by *causing* problems for bad people' (Owen, 2023, p.544). Across *The Fallow Year*, the *Pfennigeist* emerges as a folk hero who serves justice for marginalised people who are not protected by the structure of the law, ultimately setting up the conflict in series finale *Holy Terrors*.

Conclusions

'For centuries [the trickster] has, in his various incarnations, run, flown, galloped, and most recently motorcycled through the literary imagination' (Babcock-Abrahams, 1975, p.158), with writers drawing on and remixing this mythic archetype to playfully examine contemporary issues in contemporary media. Given the shared themes between trickster tales and YA, the trickster figure may resonate deeply with a marginalised, teenage audience, and writers working in this space may use trickster protagonists to craft fun, anarchic, cathartic narratives for their young, queer readers. In *Little Thieves*, Owen has constructed an effective example of a queer YA trickster character—a marginalised, boundary-crossing, shapeshifting figure who represents 'liminality, duality, subversion, and irony' (Landay, 1998, p.2) and who uses humour, trickery, and mischief to undermine the dominant powers and create 'new order […] born out of mischief and play' (2015, (p.20 – 21) before vanishing from the world.

My own creative thesis (Henderson, 2023) includes a YA fantasy novel, *Children of the Dusk*, which stars a queer trickster god character intended to explore and showcase the narrative potential of this character type in media for a marginalised, adolescent demographic. In this work I attempted to fill a market gap, but I also drew on existing literature in the evolving space of LGBTQIA+ teen fiction—an emerging 'canon' of queer YA tricksters in which Vanja takes pride of place. Arguably, she sits alongside Mackenzie Lee's Loki (2019), the magical genderqueer shapeshifter Teo from A.R. Capetta's *The Brilliant Death* (2018), the social media shapeshifter Felix from Kacen Callender's *Felix Ever After* (2020), and the rowdy queer ensemble cast who take down corrupt authority figures in M.K. England's *Spellhacker* (2020)—among many others. As queer YA continues to evolve, so do the tools writers use to construct their protagonists. Turning to the ancient and enduring trickster can be a powerful method to examine modern queer adolescence, and to create engaging, fun, cathartic stories in a variety of genres.

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