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**Clockwork, corsets and fabricated beasties: women and identity in YA steampunk**

Abstract:

Steampunk is a genre that lends itself particularly well to young adult fiction. There is a sense of optimism present in the pages of a steampunk novel, and a particular aesthetic that accompanies the impossibility of futuristic technology in the pre-1900 era. That's where the 'steam' element comes from; steam power was the most predominant form of power available at the time. The 'punk' element is representative of the genre's tendency to fly in the face of convention, to question prevailing ideologies and disregard those elements of societal order that don't suit it. It is interesting, then, to explore the position of women in a steampunk novel. Identities slip and slide in steampunk, depending on what a person represents of what they are rebelling against. Women particularly represent the 'punk' element because the societal pressures on them did not extend to men during that era. Women must fight for their opportunities, often expressing their identity in unusual ways in order to escape the oppressive force of their culture. Scott Westerfeld's Leviathan series is a popular steampunk/young adult series set in the years leading up to World War I. He uses three female steampunk archetypes: the lady boffin or scientist, the girl rebel or engineer, and the girl dressed as a boy in order to take the freedoms that were denied to her in skirts and corsets. These fictional women not only disturb the status quo of their situational context, they provide a textual representation and expression of the identity issues felt by adolescent readers who are almost in a position where their own place in society will need to be determined. This paper will analyse how Westerfeld's fictional women turn societal constraints into opportunities and build their own subversive identities against the gendered assumptions present in their time period.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Steampunk – Westerfeld – Young adult – Gender – Identity

Gender, as a culturally specific performance of identity, is dependent on the binary opposition of man and woman in Western society with a heterosexual woman's identity being intrinsically linked to the pursuit and attainment of a masculine mate. Textual representations of women, particularly in the media engaged with by teenaged women, stress this connection between feminine identity and masculinity by establishing the requirement that women engage in a healthy heterosexual relationship in order to feel 'whole', no matter how many other achievements she may have accumulated before then. While the majority of young adult (YA) literature conforms to the gendered binary and reinforces the masculine/feminine social hierarchy, steampunk as a YA genre examines the theme of identity and belonging through a 'punk' ideology: subverting and questioning the prevailing social structure through the gender performances of female characters. Steampunk is an eclectic literary genre and lifestyle that holds a mirror to society and creates textual representations of women which challenge and critique the dependence of women on men and their position in the social order. Scott Westerfeld's Leviathan series (2009) conforms to the cultural expectation of women earning the 'reward' of a husband when they have completed the tasks set for them in the narrative; however, they do so by moving outside of the social male/female gender norms of Victorian society and creating their own personal identities in resistance to the binary nature of gender performance. This establishes a desirability in subverting gender performance in young readers, by critiquing the male/female social hierarchy without giving up the 'luxuries' that Western women have been taught to value: namely, becoming a wife and mother.

Feminist philosopher Judith Butler argued that gender is a performance, rather than a biological imperative (Butler 1988). While the nature of gender is fluid, and based mainly in societal and cultural performance, the prevailing method of our culture is to divide people into two groups: male and female, with different performances ascribed to each gender. There are male and female restrooms, dormitories, toy and film categories etc. This creates a gendered binary within our society, which also invites an adversarial relationship where one gender is subordinate to the other. When women begin to learn to negotiate their identity within a masculine-dominated culture, they may find themselves limited by the gendered performances available to them because they need to navigate the complexities of what is seen as masculine and feminine and identify themselves with reference to masculine gender power (Whelehan 2000).

Expectations from social construction and popular culture make it clear how women are expected to perform. When you type 'women' into Google images, pictures of white women with impeccable hair, money, looks, a good job, strength, sex appeal and, most importantly, a man, come up in the search (Google 2012). The image of the 'ideal woman' surrounds women and girls from the moment they begin engaging with popular culture, and drives the gender performative decisions they make (Whelehan 2000). The Bridget Jones effect is an apt description of the difficulties faced by modern women when they are negotiating their identity and finding a place to belong in a male-dominated society. The Bridget Jones effect examines the struggle within women who want to subvert gender expectations and also want to be in a heterosexual relationship, and concludes that while societal expectations drive women to be strong and independent in order to combat patriarchy, there is also an expectation that a

woman has only 'arrived' or become whole when she is with a man (Whelehan 2000, 135). It argues that feminism is incompatible with heterosexuality because it is 'prudish, judgemental and unattractive' (Whelehan 2000, 137) and women are therefore encouraged through media such as films and texts to forgo their feminist ideals if they wish to secure a man. This desire to 'have it all' is deeply entrenched in the female gendered identity of contemporary society.

In popular culture, a woman is not seen to have truly 'made it' until she is a wife and mother, or at least on her way to becoming one. There are notable exceptions to this ideal in popular culture, such as Buffy Summers (*Buffy the vampire slayer* 1997) and Princess Merida (*Brave* 2012), but on the whole contemporary women are taught to view their identity and sense of belonging in the context of a stable relationship. It's a negotiation between the binary loci of gender identity and performance, with females being complete or whole when they are connected to a male. This theme of fixing feminine identity with a connection to masculinity is particularly prevalent in YA literature, as is the theme of identity and belonging in general (Ross 2010). This extension of societal gender structures into media consumed by young people establishes the subordination of women to men, and their subsequent reliance on men for 'wholeness', and through constant reiteration creates an internalised understanding of gendered identity in the context of the masculine-dominated gender hierarchy (Rowe 1979).

Once a contemporary young woman begins to engage with YA literature, she begins identifying with women who are strong, independent and intelligent, sometimes fighting wars and re-establishing societies, before settling into wife and motherhood at the story's conclusion. The majority of fictional heroines in YA literature today embody different aspects of the feminist discourse, but still wind up fixating their identity in the context of their relationship to a man. In some cases, like *Twilight*'s Bella Swan (Meyer 2005), a woman's position with regards to her masculine counterpoint is so crucial to the story that it blocks out all other issues (Myers 2009). Others, like Katniss Everdeen (Collins 2008), are powerful and independent in their own right, but the characters around them and the fans of the books are always speculating about their romantic entanglements, not necessarily overshadowing the predominate narrative, but still distracting from it (Barnes 2010). Katniss, in particular, seems androgynous during the initial stages of *The hunger games* (2008) until she is paired with Peeta Mellark, her fellow tribute, forcing her to adapt her gender performance to comply with the Capitol's views of femininity (Miller 2012). Although female gendered performance in YA is leaning towards less traditionally feminine traits (fighting in wars etc), a young woman in YA fiction is still judged by her relationship to her love interest and her identity within the narrative is dependent on how she negotiates the binary relationship between male and female, where she sits in the gendered hierarchy and how she performs her femininity with regard to masculinity.

YA steampunk, however, creates a 'punk' element within feminine identity performance (Cherry & Mellins 2012). Women in steampunk must identify themselves in the context of the male/female hierarchy, because it's virtually unavoidable (not just for them but for every woman), but they do so in a way that

subverts and critiques the hierarchy. They identify themselves and position themselves with relation to men, but in a way that disturbs the masculine status quo and draws attention to its limitations.

Steampunk is a lifestyle and genre that combines Victoriana with science fiction, and is known for subverting and critiquing societal conventions; hence the 'punk' suffix. As a literary genre, steampunk was never clearly defined. Most agree that the term was coined in the late eighties as a response to cyberpunk, a genre of science fiction that explored the technologies of today within a future context; usually a dystopia (Perschon 2010). By contrast, steampunk is often set in the Victorian era, usually in the context of an alternative history where steam power has remained the dominant form of technological advancement, and predominantly maintains a more nostalgic atmosphere than dystopic fiction (Jagoda 2010). It 'revels in the beauty of structure as well as blatant imperfection' (Bulloff 2008, 13) and employs many science-fiction tropes such as lasers and time machines – but these technologies are powered by steam, or a Victorian equivalent, and are usually cobbled together in a mad scientist's basement. This do-it-yourself ethos bleeds into the genre through portrayals of marginalised groups, such as women, developing their skills through self-taught means (Casey 2009). While there aren't many literary conventions typical to steampunk because of its hybrid, magpie-like nature, it is characterised by brass, clockwork and aeronaut goggles, made for the days when flying machines were running without cockpits.

Steffen Hantke writes in his article 'Difference engines and other infernal devices: history according to steampunk' (1999) that steampunk is a useful genre for contemporary cultural examination because it is predominantly set in the Victorian era, which reflects our present society very well:

> In other words, what we share with the Victorians are essentially the same social, economic and political structures, as well as a sense that any cultural transformation can or will take place without affecting them in any direct way… what makes the Victorian past so fascinating is its unique ability to reflect the present moment. (Hantke 1999, 245)

One of the main themes of the genre is to critique the prevailing social and cultural attitudes of our time by placing them in a past context. Steampunk takes present societal conventions, such as gender performances and expectations, and reflects the desire of citizens to work against the established norm by highlighting that element in the context of the Victorian era. Gender performance and the expectations that society places on men and women are reflected and intensified in narratives set in the Victorian era because the restrictions placed on men and women in Victoriana were much greater (Casey 2009). When women participate in steampunk role-playing activities (cosplay events such as Supanova or Comiccon), they are able to subvert the gendered norms that would have restricted them in the past, and perform their gender according to their own desires and needs (Goh 2009). Heroines in steampunk interact with the gendered hierarchy of Victorian England, subverting and occasionally dominating it thanks to the tools and knowledge that their steampunk traditions have given them – traditions such as the do-it-yourself attitude and the self-taught nature of

technical ability, which level the playing field between males and females so that only the social and ideological barriers remain. As Katherine Casey wrote in 'A Corset Manifesto' (2009), 'The walls of tradition (which long held women cloistered) have crumbled' (2009, 63).

The Leviathan series by Scott Westerfeld (2009) is a YA steampunk series set in the early days of World War I. They constitute an alternative history following the lives of Deryn Sharp, a Scottish girl disguised as a boy so that she can serve as a midshipman for the British Air Service, and Prince Alexander Hohenburg, the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, who is on the run after his parents were assassinated. Alek is a Clanker, Deryn is a Darwinist. While the Clankers (or Central Powers) use war machines such as ironclads to fight their wars, the Darwinists (Britain and her allies) use gene splicing to create fighting creatures. The Leviathan series has three main female characters: Deryn Sharp, Dr Norah Barlow and Lilit, and these characters approach femininity and the male/female social hierarchy in three distinct ways. Their gender performances work within the gender binary while simultaneously subverting it.

Deryn enlists the help of her brother to disguise herself as a boy, much like Viola enlisting the Captain in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (Ko 1997). Unlike Viola, Deryn's disguise is not androgynous; she plays such a convincing man that only two people in the series discover the truth. In this way, she's more of a Portia than a Viola (Howard 1988). Deryn's disguise is required because her personal identity is centred around being airborne. She feels that she belongs in the air but the only way to fly is to join the British Air Service. She becomes a man to enjoy the privileges enjoyed by men, but she embodies the 'punk' element of steampunk because she doesn't recognise their biological and social superiority:

> It just wasn't fair, her being born a girl!... [Boys] couldn't be much stronger, and she didn't credit that they were as smart or as brave. So why should they be allowed into the king's service and not her? (Westerfeld 2009, 24)

Deryn Sharp, in adopting the persona of Dylan Sharp, acknowledges the masculine superiority as prescribed by the culture but she aims to prove her own superiority. She aspires to masculine power, choosing to assume a masculine role indefinitely (Howard 1988), although she still fantasises about revealing herself as a woman – proving that her locus of identity is still located in her biological: 'A natural airman, in case you haven't noticed. And in conclusion, I'd like to add that I'm a girl and you can all get stuffed!' (Westerfeld 2009, 36).

While it could be argued that her decision to disrupt her biologically assigned gender is a celebration of male superiority and the naturalness of patriarchy, I would argue that her ability to convincingly perform the gendered assumptions linked to masculinity demonstrates the instability of socially constructed gender and openly challenges the male-dominated social hierarchy by demonstrating feminine ability (Berek 2004). In this way, Deryn positions herself in society in relation to the men around her, but in a way which disrupts the status quo and causes the men in her life, such as Alek and his manservant Count Volger, to reconsider their own position in relation to the opposite sex.

Dr Nora Barlow is another woman working around her culturally constructed gender. She is a boffin, or scientist. Her speciality is splicing the genes of creatures to create new ones. Dr Barlow works in diplomatic relations, although she is not a member of the government. Deryn says that 'she has no idea what Dr Barlow's real position was, except that it involved ordering people about and acting superior' (Westerfeld 2011, 395).

Dr Barlow has chosen to separate herself from the gendered hierarchy of Victorian England by identifying herself within the context of a separate hierarchy: the Zoological Society, which is a front for international spies. In this society, the male/female binary is removed, with individuals being favoured for their practical and intellectual abilities over their gender. Dr Barlow maintains an outward appearance of femininity, performing the necessary gender indicators such as wearing dresses, keeping her appearance immaculate and avoiding physical labour (Berek 2004). She is a dangerous figure in the male/female social hierarchy because the power holders of that hierarchy cannot exercise their gendered power over her, and the power she holds in the zoological society trumps gendered power, as shown when she commandeers the Leviathan airship to go to Turkey. She is an autonomous, direct threat to patriarchy; an anomaly that combats gendered assumptions by disregarding them as no longer applying to her. She is a 'steampunk damsel without distress' (Perschon 2010, 159). By asserting her independence from gender, Dr Barlow is displaying a gendered identity that is subversive and disturbs the status quo of the male/female binary situation.

Instead of working around her biological gender, Lilit is a female character who plans to change the social hierarchy to suit her gendered performance, rather than altering her gendered performance to suit it. Lilit is a Turkish anarchist whose family is at the heart of the Ottoman revolution. In this alternative history, the revolution begun by Lilit's family is actually a second Ottoman revolution following 1908 revolution that was unsuccessful (Westerfeld 2010). In Westerfeld's version, the anarchists rebelled a second time in 1914 and, with the help of Deryn and Alek, succeeded. Lilit and her family fought to bring about social change because they were unhappy with the gender hierarchy at work in the Ottoman society: 'Once the revolution comes, women will be the equal of men in all things!' (Westerfeld 2010, 293). Lilit pilots Clanker walkers better than Alek and beats him in a knife fight. She is also intuitive – a skill attributed to the female sex – as shown when she works out that Deryn is a girl, and she wears dresses instead of trousers even when she is fixing engines. Her gender performance is both masculine and feminine.

Lilit does not emulate men or attempt to be seen as one, instead she considers herself their equal and in some cases their better. She wants to rid society of a gendered hierarchy, and poses herself as an active threat against the patriarchy employed by the sultan and the men under his command. Her identity as a woman is not contingent on working around society. Rather, she intends to force society to work for her, changing it to accommodate a more rounded, capable ideal of femininity and create a new social order where she can belong. Hers is the most extreme form of gender subversion, and the most obvious example of the 'punk' element of steampunk. Lilit is not just subverting the dominant paradigm, she is at war with it.

Deryn Sharp, Dr Barlow and Lilit each actively create a situation where they can belong, a place where their personal identity can blossom. They negotiate their gender performance in terms of the masculine paradigm and situate their feminine identity by subverting the gendered assumptions of their social, situational context. They are heroines of the steampunk genre, refusing to negotiate their gender roles according to the expectations around them (Casey 2009). The beasties are gene-spliced creatures created by the Darwinists, and they create new identities and new states of being due to their fabricated, non-natural origins. The beasties establish a physical manifestation of each woman's attempt to negotiate her femininity within the masculine hierarchy. Deryn, as the woman with the most personal identification with beasties, is also the most adaptable female – which connects her with Darwin's theory of evolution and the ability of beasties to fulfil any need with the right life threads. Dr Barlow's position as a practitioner of gene splicing reflects her ability to create an entirely new social hierarchy or ecosystem to exist in. Lilit exists in both the Darwinist and Clanker worlds, being a neutral Ottoman. In accordance with her position as a rounded, dual female/male figure, she doesn't believe in using animals for personal ends or divorcing them from their personhood.

> 'But you're not supposed to name beasties! If you get too attached, you can't use them properly.'
> 'Use them?' Lilit asked. 'What a horrid way to think of animals.' (Westerfeld 2010, 330)

Lilit is resisting the patriarchal paradigm of reducing creatures to their biological imperative without recognising their individuality. Beasties also effect a change on Alek, as the male perspective in the books, who becomes more open to feminine power and agency the longer he remains under the influence of the Darwinists and engages with their beasties. The expression and negotiation of feminine identity and belonging manifests itself in creatures who do not naturally exist, but make a place for themselves in society depending on their skills.

While Deryn, Dr Barlow and Lilit are negotiating their gendered performances in the context of a fictional alternative history, the real-world reader of Westerfeld's Leviathan series is negotiating their identity in the context of the real world. And the real world has expectations of women, specific gender performances that women internalise through years of engaging with feminine identities in textual form (Rowe 1979). As discussed above, the Bridget Jones effect is the social construction of a woman as being 'complete' or 'whole' after 'complex navigation between what is seen as masculine and what is seen as feminine… the one glittering prize that indicates you've really "arrived" – getting the man' (Whelehan 2000, 135).

Lilit leads a successful revolution and establishes a new social order, but women still don't achieve full equality under her watch and when she tries to continue asserting her independence from the male/female paradigm she is punished: 'The Committee promised [women's equality] back when we were rebels… But now that we're in power, there seems to be no rush. And when I complained, I was sent five thousand miles away' (Westerfeld 2011, 446-47). Lilit, as representative of the most obvious threat to patriarchy in the books, does not 'have it all', but Dr Barlow and Deryn do.

Dr Barlow is implied to be involved with Alek's manservant Count Volger while Deryn is rewarded for her strength and determination throughout the narrative by winning the heart of a handsome prince: Alek. Depending on your angle, this could be read as a reversion to the patriarchal need for women to be connected with a man in order to be whole, or it could be read as a celebration of the subversion and denial of gendered assumptions by placing Deryn and Dr Barlow in the glorified position of 'having it all' (Whelehan 2000, 135) despite their refusal to engage with the male/female hierarchy in a traditional manner. Personally, I think it's both. While Lilit's punishment for refusing to accept the gendered identity imposed on her by the social order does read as a recognition of patriarchal dominance, the use of the Bridget Jones ideology establishes the possibility that women can oppose the gendered hierarchy without giving up the 'luxuries' society has taught women to value; namely, their masculine mate. It conforms to the steampunk tradition of attacking the status quo, in a way that makes it desirable for young women to emulate or internalise.

While YA literature tends to conform to the culturally specific performance of feminine identity as being dependant on a masculine counterpoint, YA steampunk moves against this trend by critiquing traditional gender performances while simultaneously establishing the possibility that women can 'have it all' without conforming to social and cultural gender expectations. While the most radical representations of gender subversion are punished, those women who subvert and critique social constructions of gender within the male/female hierarchy are rewarded in the text by being shown to 'have it all'; that is, a secure career, freedom, independence, and a healthy heterosexual relationship. Feminist ideals and traditions are often minimised in texts engaged with and read by young women because feminism as a practice is considered radical and incompatible with a heterosexual relationship (Whelehan 2000); however, the Leviathan series, and steampunk as a rule, create representations of femininity that are 'punked' and uncompromising in their feminist ideals without fear of losing the possibility of a healthy heterosexual relationship.

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