

Masterproef aangeboden tot
het verkrijgen van het
diploma Master of Arts in het
vertalen

Help! My character is non-binary:
A English-Dutch translation informed by a survey of
young Flemish readers' comprehension of and
preferences for the Dutch non-binary pronouns *die/diens*,
hen/hun and *die/hun*

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Datum: 31 mei 2024

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Preface

This master thesis has been a long-term project: it has been brewing for five semesters and was written on two continents. It would not have been realised without the help of the following people:

Firstly, I would like to thank my promotor Jack McMartin and my co-promotor Leen Van Den Broucke. Thank you both for sticking with me this long. At one point, we had a Skype discussion while I was studying abroad in Morocco, Jack was in the USA and Leen in The Netherlands. It is one of my favourite examples of globalisation and very fitting as example to the way this thesis was written. Leen, I am forever grateful that even after your departure from KU Leuven you still wanted to work with me on this translation. Jack, thank you for all your feedback and willingness to supervise this research experiment out of your comfort zone. It was a pleasure to have the both of you as my supervisors.

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Lastly, I want to thank all of the teenagers who responded to my survey. This thesis would literally not have been possible without your help. You are all anonymous, but I will cherish you all forever. I would like to give a big shout-out to the respondent who wished me luck in the comment section, seeing this comment always made me motivated to continue.

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Abstract

This master's thesis is conceived as a tool for English-Dutch translators faced with deciding how to translate non-binary pronouns. One part comprises a reader-response questionnaire of a cohort of 16-to-19-year-old readers tasked with comprehending and expressing preferences toward a story fragment translated by me and featuring a non-binary character. The results were used to inform the final translation, which comprises a second, applied part of the thesis. As there is currently no official guideline on non-binary pronouns in Dutch, translators are often faced with uncertainty on how to approach a text that contains non-binary pronouns. This study is a complementary study to the research done by Vos and Nutters (2022), but differs in that it focuses on young adult readers in the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. The reader-response questionnaire tested the levels of narrative engagement and mental imagery evoked in respondents while reading my translation of the first chapter of Nghi Vo's (2020) novella *The Empress of Salt and Fortune*.

The literature review provides an overview of strategies and insights gathered from other languages and from the fight for inclusive language, including the work of Blaubergs (1980), Gustafsson Sendén et al. (2015), Waszink (2022) and Wehle (2020). It also explores how literature can be a tool in improving real-life attitudes towards non-binary and genderqueer people through the 'mere exposure effect' (Zajonc, 1968) and transportation theory (Green & Brock; 2000).

The questionnaire was adapted from Vos and Nutters (2022) and included the narrative engagement scale developed and tested by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) and the mental imagery section from Kuijpers et al. (2014). The survey was sent out to schools in Flanders and 100 completed questionnaires were returned and analysed. The participants were asked to read my translation of the first chapter of *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* and then answered the questions based on this reading experience. In order to test the difference in reception, three identical texts where only the pronouns differed were randomly distributed among the participants. The non-binary pronouns used for this research were *die/hen/hun*, *die/die/diens* and *hen/hen/hun*. The set of pronouns that had the highest reading engagement and mental imagery scores was used in the final translation, on the assumption that it had the most potential to be accepted by Dutch-speaking readers. Different subgroupings based on certain demographic information, such as province, was also analysed to gauge the impact of these factors on the reception of the non-binary pronouns.

Results show that there were very few differences in reception between the three sets of non-binary pronouns. All texts scored low on transportation, but the reception of *die/die/diens* pronouns was slightly better overall. As a result, the complete translation of the first five chapters of the novella were translated using *die/die/diens* pronouns.

Deze masterproef is ontworpen als een hulpmiddel voor vertalers Engels-Nederlands bij het beslissen hoe non-binaire voornaamwoorden te vertalen. Een deel bestaat uit een reader-response vragenlijst van een cohort van zestien- tot negentien-jarigen waarvan gevraagd werd om een door mij vertaald fragment uit een verhaal met een non-binair personage te begrijpen en hun voorkeuren daaromtrent te uiten. De resultaten werden dan gebruikt om een geïnformeerde beslissing te maken voor de uiteindelijke vertaling, wat het tweede, praktische deel van de thesis inhield. Er zijn in het Nederlands tot op heden geen officiële richtlijnen omtrent non-binaire voornaamwoorden en vertalers worden zo geregeld geconfronteerd met onduidelijkheid rond het vertalen van een tekst met non-binaire voornaamwoorden. Dit onderzoek is aanvullend onderzoek bij het werk van Vos en Nutters (2022), maar verschilt in dat het zich focust op Nederlandstalige jongeren in België. Door middel van de reader-response vragenlijst werd onderzocht hoe de respondenten scoorden op vlak van 'narrative engagement' en 'mental imagery' tijdens het lezen van mijn vertaling van het eerste hoofdstuk uit de novelle *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* van Nghi Vo (2020).

In de kritische literatuurstudie wordt een overzicht gegeven van strategieën en inzichten uit andere talen of uit de strijd voor inclusief taalgebruik, onder andere uit het werk van Blaubergs (1980), Gustafsson Sendén et al. (2015), Waszink (2022) en Wehle (2020). Daarnaast werd er ook gekeken hoe literatuur een hulpmiddel kan zijn bij het verbeteren van real-life houdingen tegenover non-binaire en genderqueer mensen door het '*mere exposure*' effect (Zajonc, 1968) en de *transportation* theorie (Green & Brock; 2000).

De enquête was gebaseerd op de vragenlijst gebruikt door Vos en Nutters (2022) en bevatte de *narrative engagement*-schaal ontwikkeld en getest door Buselle en Bilandzic (2009) en een onderdeel rond *mental imagery* van Kuijpers et al. (2014). De enquête werd verstuurd naar scholen in Vlaanderen en 100 volledig ingevulde enquêtes werden teruggestuurd en geanalyseerd. De deelnemers werden gevraagd het eerste hoofdstuk van *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* te lezen en beantwoordden daarna de vragen gebaseerd op hun leeservaring. Om het verschil in begrip te onderzoeken, werden drie identieke teksten waar enkel de voornaamwoorden verschilden willekeurig onder de respondenten verspreid. De non-binaire voornaamwoorden die gebruikt werden voor dit onderzoek waren die/hen/hun, die/die/diens en hen/hen/hun. De voornaamwoorden die het hoogst scoorden op *reading engagement* en *mental imagery* werden gebruikt in de uiteindelijke vertaling aangezien ervan uit gegaan wordt dat deze het meest kans maken om door een Nederlandstalig leespubliek geaccepteerd te worden. Verschillende subgroepen gebaseerd op bepaalde demografische gegevens, zoals provincie, werden ook onderzocht om de impact van deze factoren op het begrip van non-binaire voornaamwoorden te bestuderen.

De resultaten wijzen uit dat er slechts minieme verschillen in begrip waren tussen de drie verschillende groepen non-binaire voornaamwoorden. Alle teksten scoorden slecht op vlak van *transportation*, maar het begrip lag met die/die/diens voornaamwoorden algemeen iets hoger. Bijgevolg werd de volledige vertaling van de eerste vijf hoofdstukken van de novelle vertaald met die/die/diens voornaamwoorden.

Introduction

This paper explores the different options for the translation of non-binary pronouns from English to Dutch. It consists of a survey of young readers in Flanders and a self-reflection on my own translation of a novella featuring a non-binary character. Before embarking on the study itself, it is useful to provide an overview of the current status of the debate on non-binary pronouns in Dutch.

The Dutch Language Union, known by its Dutch-language moniker the ‘Taalunie’, is an international regulatory institution that “develops and promotes policy on Dutch” in all Dutch-speaking regions (Taalunie, n.d.). In August 2022, it released guidelines on the use of gender conscious language. The article, published on their language advice website [Taaladvies.net](https://taaladvies.net), discusses several ways language can be used to be more inclusive. One topic discussed is non-binary pronouns. [Taaladvies](https://taaladvies.net) acknowledges:

Over het verwijzen naar een non-binaire persoon, naar personen van wie het gender niet bekend is en ook naar personen in het algemeen is geen overeenstemming. Dit is een proces dat in ontwikkeling is. Op dit moment lijken *die* en enkelvoudig *hen* het meest kansrijk, eventueel uitgebreid met *diegene*, met als bezitsvormen *diens* en enkelvoudig *hun*. (Taaladvies.net (a), n.d.) [There is no consensus on how to refer to a non-binary person, nor to people whose gender is unknown or to people in general. This is a work in progress. At this time, *die* and singular *hen* seem the most likely to become standardised, possibly augmented with *diegene* and with the possessive pronouns *diens* and the singular *hun*. (my translation).]

This statement by the Taalunie can be seen in light of the ongoing public debate about inclusive language use in Dutch. Several articles have been written on the topic in both Flanders and the Netherlands, see among others Becker (2020), Blokland (2021), Strubbe (2021) and Treutkens (2022). The debate shows that there was a need for more concise advice on how to handle this relatively new issue in the Dutch language.

Until these guidelines were released, results from the 2016 *Transgender Netwerk Nederland* poll were used as a benchmark for non-binary pronouns, based on a poll of 500 people conducted by the platform about the non-binary pronoun in Dutch (Transgender Netwerk Nederland, 2016). Several news agencies and governmental organizations published internal guidelines on non-binary pronouns in the meantime as well. The Dutch news agency ANP announced in 2021 that they would use *die/diens* or *hen/hun* for people who do not want to be referred to as man or woman (ANP, 2021). In their publication on clear communication, *Heerlijk Helder*, the Flemish Government advises its employees to use *die/diens* or *die/dies* to refer to people who prefer to be addressed with non-binary pronouns (Vlaanderen.be, n.d.).

Although the Taalunie has since acknowledged non-binary pronouns, no solutions have been standardised and several grammatical issues with each of the traditional uses of these pronouns have been highlighted (Taaladvies.net (b), n.d.). I will briefly discuss the pronouns that will be used in this thesis based on what Taaladvies.net explains on its website; using examples from *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* by Nghi Vo (2020) and my translations to illustrate.

First, the personal pronouns *die* and *hen*. *Die* is already a demonstrative pronoun used to refer to people, but in some sentences, it can be emphatic or repetitive. E.g.: “Eerder die dag had die door het dennenbosje gelopen” (“They (*die*) had crossed the white pine copse earlier that (*die*) day”) (p. 10). The pronoun *hen* is a personal pronoun traditionally used to refer to multiple people and it has never been used as subject. When used as a non-binary pronoun, the unclear reference to one or multiple people and its ungrammaticality are the main problems for *hen*. E.g.: “Chih begon zich net af te vragen wat hen moest doen toen de oude vrouw hen opmerkte” (“Chih was just wondering what [they (*hen*) should] do when the old woman caught sight of them (*hen*)”) (p. 13). In English, it also is at times unclear if *they* refers to one person or a group.

As for the possessive pronouns, *diens* and *hun* have the most potential for shifting their meanings to include non-binary people. *Diens* is the male case of *die*, the female case is *dier*. Nowadays the word is quite formal and the main argument against *diens* is that, because of its etymology, it can ‘feel’ masculine. E.g., “een plooi van diens gewaad rond diens lichaam gewikkeld” (a fold of their (*diens*) robe tucked around their (*diens*) body) (p. 19). *Hun* is traditionally a possessive pronoun referring to multiple people and the unclear reference when used as a non-binary pronoun is its main disadvantage. E.g., “een plooi van hun gewaad rond hun lichaam gewikkeld” (a fold of their (*diens*) robe tucked around their (*diens*) body against the spring chill) (p. 19). Taaladvies.net also mentions several neopronouns, such as *xij*, *dij*, *dies* and *hin*, but as they are recent additions and change often, I will not elaborate on them here.

This paper aims to determine which pronouns are most easily understood and preferred by a group of young readers in Flanders and, by extension, to be an aid in determining which pronouns are readily adopted by the general, Dutch-speaking public. The paper is part scientific study and part translation, responding to the option given within in the MA Translation to combine a scientific study with an ‘applied’ translation component, that is, a translation by me and an accompanying reflection. In this novel way, it inscribes itself in the effort to develop gender-neutral ways of expression by using options raised by the trans- and non-binary communities in Belgium and the Netherlands and ‘tested’ on young readers. For this research, I will base myself on the study by Vos and Nutters (2022) who looked at how their respondents received the pronouns *hen/hun* and *die/hun*. The respondents of their research had a specific profile, with most being language professionals such as translators from the Netherlands, and their results could not be generalised to a wider public. I aim to add to their research by surveying teenagers’ comprehension of and preference for certain non-binary pronoun options using my own English-Dutch translation of a novella for young adult readers as the test material. Their responses will in turn inform my translation decisions. Teenagers were chosen as the target group because they are

the intended readers for young adult books and because through contacting schools, a more general opinion could be gauged. As there is mandatory education until the age of eighteen in Belgium, a more diverse respondent group was reached than with Vos and Nutters (2022). People with different genders, mother tongues and varying reading frequencies were included, but the mean age remained stable. All participants had to be sixteen or older because of ethical constraints, as parental consent is needed for pupils below the age of sixteen. The results are not representative of the whole population, but they do reflect young adult readership. There is also an increase in teenagers identifying as transgender and non-binary (Transgender Infopunt, 2022; Transvisie, n.d.). This could mean that teenagers have had more contact with non-binary pronouns than the general public and thus have a different perspective and reading experience compared to the adult respondents of Vos and Nutters' (2022) study. A last practical advantage of using teenagers as respondents was that this group could be relatively easily reached by contacting schools.

A young adult book was chosen firstly because of the profile of the respondents of this research, but secondly because young adult novels tend to include non-binary and gender non-conforming characters more often than books for adults. The appendix of this thesis includes an updated list of books with transgender, queer, non-binary and gender non-conforming characters based on a pilot study I conducted as part of my bachelor's thesis (Van Poucke, 2021). The focus of this study is limited to Flanders, a subset of the Dutch-speaking public that has often been overlooked in debates about non-binary pronoun conventions in Dutch. I will also look at other countries and their attempts towards making their language more gender-neutral to see if Dutch can adapt similar methods. The study conducted by Wehle (2020) in the Czech Republic is one such example.

I will use my translation of the novella *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* (2020) by Nghi Vo as a case study. The story follows cleric Chih as they uncover the story of Rabbit, the handmaiden of the Northern Emperess In-yo. The book is the first in *The Singing Hills Cycle*. This story is useful for this research as one of the main characters, Chih, uses *they/them* pronouns. The non-binary identity of Chih is tied to their role as a cleric, as Vo explains on her Twitter account:

Yes, the space the clerics of Singing Hills occupy in their society is specifically non-binary. For clerics like Chih, brought up from a young age at the abbey, their gender is [sic] demonstrated and socialized is 'cleric'. (Vo, 2022a)

People who take their vows later renounce their gender (and also their outside connections and resources) upon entering the order. As it may be supposed, a lot of non-binary people find their way to Singing Hills and to other orders that have a similar set-up. (Vo, 2022b)

The story has two narrators: a selective omniscient narrator with focalisation of Chih, and Rabbit, who recounts her time with the empress in the past. This means the non-binary pronouns were mostly featured in parts discussing the present. In order to determine which pronouns would be the best suited

for a Dutch-speaking public, I conducted a survey similar to the one used by Vos and Nutters (2022). I made three versions of the first chapter, one version with *die/hun* pronouns, one with *hen/hun* and one with *die/diens*. Respondents were randomly allocated a version and then had to complete the questionnaire which was the same for each respondent. A copy of the questionnaire and the informed consent document can also be found in the appendix. The survey is based on the questionnaire used by Vos and Nutters (2022), which in turn was based on the survey by Guerberof-Arenas and Toral (2020).

Literature is an important tool to improve attitudes and perception of certain marginalized groups in society as shown by transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000). When readers report high transportation while reading a story with a non-binary protagonist, their attitudes towards non-binary people in real life will likely improve. Improved attitudes towards non-binary characters imply greater respect for non-binary people and their pronouns, as literature is often seen as a 'trial' for real life situations (Bott & McNeil, 2008). Repeated exposure to a language phenomenon, such as non-binary pronouns, is also shown to increase likability (Moreland & Topolinski, 2010; Zajonc, 1968) and use of the language after exposure (Koeser et al., 2015) as well.

This shows that literature has the potential to impact the real world by helping readers adapt to a new piece of language, non-binary pronouns in this case. For this to work successfully, translators need to have the right tools and know which non-binary pronouns already provide the most transportation in order to facilitate the reading experience which in turn impacts the level of transportation. This thesis aims to be such a tool; it aims to help translators (including myself) make an informed choice regarding which pronouns they choose to use in their translation when faced with non-binary pronouns.

The first chapter will explore existing literature on three main topics: first, what insights can be found from the research on gender-neutral language in general and what advancements have been made in this field. The second topic goes more in detail on how several languages use non-binary language and pronouns. What strategies do these languages use and do they offer unexplored avenues for non-binary language in Dutch? Most studies discussed in this part focus on the language used by the gender-queer and non-binary communities themselves, which is important regarding genuine representation. The last part of the literature review connects representation of non-binary people to the power of literature to influence on the real world. The importance of the translator is also briefly touched upon here. The second chapter explains the methodology used for the survey. It discusses the narrative engagement theory by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) and the other scales used for the questionnaire in more detail. It also elaborates on the survey questions and participants. The third chapter is a short translation analysis of *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* by Nghi Vo (2020) and discusses the plot and main translation hurdles. This is followed by the translation itself, with the pronouns *die/die/diens* as this set was preferred by the survey respondents. The fifth chapter discusses the results of the survey in more detail, following the structure put forth in Vos and Nutters (2022). The general results per pronoun set are examined, and attention is paid to how different factors (province/dialect, reading habits, reading

language, school programme, and knowing queer people) might impact the reading experience. The last chapter draws conclusions from the thesis as a whole and raises avenues for further research.

Translating non-binary pronouns

Until very recently, the linguistic problem posed by non-binary language was generally overlooked within translation studies (for an overview of the literature, see Van Poucke, 2021). Queer Translation Studies proves an ideal starting point to study this translation issue as it centres queer approaches to translation in order to preserve queerness in the text (Epstein, 2017). Translation is often seen as creating bridges between languages and cultures. It is also seen “as a way of bringing in new ideas to the target countries” (Epstein & Chapman, 2021, p. 5). In the context of Queer Translation Studies, these new ideas involve queer identities, which might be unknown or ignored in the target culture. Translation forces a confrontation with these concepts as they must be translated into the target language.

There are several ways one can deal with these concepts following Queer Translation Studies. Both Démont (2018) and Epstein (2017) see acknowledging and stressing the queerness of the text as the best way to translate queer identities. They mention ‘queering’ (Démont, 2018) and ‘aqueering’ (Epstein, 2017) strategies opposed to ‘misrecognizing’ and ‘minoritizing’ strategies (Démont, 2018). The latter do not translate the queer identity, or they assimilate it while ‘queering’ translations focus on the disruption caused by the queerness in the language. A successful ‘queering’ translation creates a similar effect in the language. Epstein (2017) even advocates for increasing the queerness in the translation.

This focus on the queerness rather than away from it can help open up the discussion about these identities in the target language and culture. This is also what this study wants to accomplish. By looking at several different languages and within the target language, Dutch, I want to support my decision for the translated non-binary language.

Gender-neutral language

In 1980, Maija Blaubergs categorised the eight most common arguments against changing sexist language and more specifically, against changing the male generic. Several of the arguments she found then are also raised in the current discussion on gender-neutral language. But Blaubergs concluded her overview hopefully with:

“However, consistent with the processes of language change that have been reported historically, nonsexist language forms and usage patterns now coexist with earlier forms and resistance to the new usage will continue on the part of some individuals” (Blaubergs, 1980, p. 145)

Now, more than forty years later, several of the language changes that were ridiculed are now commonplace. Although we are still discussing non-sexist and gender-neutral language, we have come a long way and we will undoubtedly go even further. The following chapter will discuss several proposals towards more inclusive language in multiple languages that were raised in the last ten years.

In her book *Dat mag je óók (al niet meer) zeggen*, Vivien Waszink (2022) discusses how the Dutch language is changing in order to be more inclusive and less offensive. Two chapters go more in depth on gender and gender-neutral language. Waszink explains the tendency of addressing a group of people with the noun denoting the action they have in common. This is often more inclusive and more precise as the shared action unites the addressed more than gender does. She mentions that the Dutch Railways NS have started addressing their passengers with the phrase ‘beste reizigers’ (dear travellers) instead of the gendered phrase ‘dames en heren (ladies and gentlemen) when making announcements. Another example is city governments starting a letter to the inhabitants of the city with ‘beste inwoner’ instead of ‘beste meneer/mevrouw’. These shifts towards inclusive, gender-neutral language are subtle and often more accurate.

While these words (*reiziger* and *inwoner*) are seen as the neutral words, they are originally meant to refer to men, the feminine forms being *reizigster* and *inwoonster*. This is one expression of grammatical gender in Dutch, which Levi Hord (2016, p.4) defines as:

a noun class system by which nouns are divided into two or more categories, two of which usually correspond with “male” and “female” human genders, respectively. Nouns that do not reflect semantic, or “human”, gender (e.g. tree, car) are sorted into the categories without any correlation with sex distinction. Semantic or embodied gender, however, is almost always aligned with “masculine” and “feminine” grammatical categories.

Nowadays masculine words are used more and more to refer to women or gender non-conforming people as well, but the male bias remains. When people see a masculine word, they will presumably still first think of a man performing that function. In some cases, the feminine version of a word even has a different meaning. Waszink (2022) takes the word *directrice* (opposed to the male *directeur*) as an example: while the word should mean female director in all functions, it often creates the mental image of a strict middle-aged woman in charge of an all-girls school or a ballet academy and not the CEO of a successful bank. Waszink notes that the male bias has faded with plural words, as we can see with *inwoners* and *reizigers*, and she poses that the singular words will also undergo this change over time. Some suffixes denoting men also have more potential to become gender-neutral than others. Waszink compares *directeur* with *vuilnisman*: the former, *-eur* from French, is less marked than the latter, *-man* (man).

In Spanish, grammatical gender is even more deeply ingrained in the language. Stetie and Zunino (2022) studied whether the generic masculine in Spanish is truly regarded as generic. They found that the masculine marker, *-o*, more often created the mental image of a group of men compared to the gender-neutral forms, *-x* and *-e*, which consistently referred to a mixed group. Stetie and Zunino also tested response times to see if reading the ‘new’ language forms required longer processing times before their meaning was understood. They found that the generic male sentences had longer response times as opposed to the ‘new’ non-binary variants. They conclude that “morphological innovations do not entail

a higher processing cost” (Stetie & Zunino, 2022, p. 27). This may suggest that a certain amount of innovation and unfamiliar structures is allowed, or perhaps even preferred, in order to construct a gender-neutral language system, just as Hekanaho (2020) suggests.

Lardelli (2023) looked at the use of three types of German gender-fair language in translation and how it impacted translation times. The three types he used were rewording to avoid gendered phrases, gender-inclusive characters like the gender star and gender gap, and the so-called neosystems such as the Sylvain system (-in) or ens-forms. He found that rewording was frequently used, even when the participant-translators were asked to focus on the other strategies as they often combined this with the demanded strategy. An interesting finding was that none of the different types of gender-fair language impacted the translation times. The participating translators did, however, report that consistency when using gender-inclusive characters or neosystems was something they struggled with. The texts where neosystems were used also had the most mistakes. Translators reported that, in order to effectively use this strategy, additional schooling would be needed. The main concern regarding rewording was finding neutral synonyms for common gendered words, and this strategy often resulted in stilted translations as a result. The neosystems could be the most applicable in day-to-day situations as it is both pronounceable and it follows the natural language flow. Most translators preferred using the ens-forms while asked to use a neosystem as they reported that it was more intuitive. Lardelli (2023) demonstrated that using gender-fair language does not impact translation time and that translators are willing to use these ‘newer’ types of language, but that additional schooling would be needed to improve the quality of the produced texts and the comfortability of the translator using them.

As with other languages that have grammatical gender (Hord, 2016), there is also a push for feminization in Dutch: for each word denoting a man, there should be a feminine word with the same meaning. The argument being that women deserve their own word and that they should be more than just implied in the male word. Instead of a generic male, gender-neutral language could opt for a generic female base. This could be hard for several nouns in Dutch as the traditional suffixes for women are not as productive as they were in the past (Waszink, 2022). Several loanwords that have entered into Dutch from English, such as *coach* or *manager*, are gender-neutral by default and it would be strange to construct female versions for these words (Waszink, 2022).

While this might be improbable for nouns, using the feminine pronoun as generic pronoun is an option suggested by linguist Marc van Oostdorp (2021). He advocates for *zij* as the only third person pronoun. By reducing the number of pronouns instead of adding another one to refer to non-binary people, one gets rid of unnecessary boxes. *Zij*, traditionally used as the female third person singular pronoun, would be the ideal candidate according to Van Oostendorp because the pronoun is also used to refer to a group of people (third person plural), e.g., *Zij zitten daar* (They sit over there). It would also be refreshing to use a feminine generic instead of the masculine. It explicitly challenges the male dominance over other genders, and it openly defies the patriarchy.

Waszink (2022) also discussed gender-neutral and non-binary pronouns. Alongside *hen/hun* and *die/diens*, she also raises several other lesser known neopronouns such as *zhij*, *ij*, *qij*, *xij* and *nijn*. *Zhij* or *zhe* is a combined form of the existing female (*zij* or *ze*) and male (*hij*) pronouns. This option was suggested by an intersex person as it combines both female and male characteristics. *Zhij* would be less useful as universal gender-neutral pronoun as it merges the binary and thus is not truly neutral. There are also some pronunciation issues as it sounds similar to *zij*. Another option was *ij*, which drops the first letter of the existing pronouns, but the pronunciation is the same as the Dutch word for egg, which might lead to strange conversations according to Waszink. *Qij/qem/qijn* or *Qij/qaar/qijn* were also suggested, with the argument that the *q* at the beginning of the word represents the *q* in queer. Other options Waszink raised were *xij/xem* or *xij/xaar* and *nij/nijn*. The latter starts with the *n* of neutral according to the inventor, but, as Waszink points out, it might be too similar to the Dutch name for Miffy (*Nijntje*). These neopronouns are not used as often as the other pronouns that have had their meaning shifted, such as *die* or *hen*. This might be because the neopronouns accentuate the newness of the language even more than the other pronouns.

When discussing non-binary pronouns, people often refer to *they/them* in English and mention how these pronouns are already accepted in the anglophone world. Hekanaho (2020) looked at the validity of this claim. More specifically, she studied how native and non-native speakers of English received several English generic and non-binary pronouns. She found that for the generic pronouns, the singular *they* was clearly preferred while neopronouns were deemed unacceptable. The participants of Hekanaho's (2020) study were encouraged to share their opinions about the suggested pronouns, and it was mentioned that while some language might be grammatically incorrect, being inclusive was perceived to be more important. This is an interesting finding as a common argument against certain gender-neutral pronouns is ungrammaticality (Taaladvies.net (b), n.d.; Vos & Nutters, 2022; Waszink, 2022). This is in line with Blaubergs' (1980) categorization of arguments against sexist language as well, more specifically regarding to the arguments calling the change "too difficult, impractical or whatever". Hekanaho (2020) proves that these arguments are not based on what the general public thinks and often only voice the prejudice of a select few.

As a grammatically gendered language, Dutch has three grammatical genders: female, male and neuter. Another option regarding gender-neutral pronouns could be using the grammatical neuter form as the gender-neutral option, as Wehle (2020) suggested in their¹ master thesis on pronouns for non-binary people in Czech. But just like in Czech, this could be dehumanizing as the grammatical neuter is hardly used to refer to humans in Dutch. On the other hand, by using the neuter to refer to people without acknowledging the derogatory meaning, it could be reclaimed by the non-binarity community. As Czech needs to make more gendered agreements, there is more potential to use the neuter. In Dutch, the most explicit way for using the neuter as gender-neutral language is using the article *het* (it) as pronoun, such as "*Het loopt het huis in*" (It walks into the house).

¹ Information on Wehle's gender identity was not found, so I will use they/them pronouns to refer to them in this paper.

One other challenge Wehle poses for the neuter in Czech is that the pronunciation is close to the masculine in the Brno dialect. It would be interesting to see how Flemish and Dutch dialects influence the reception and adaption of non-binary language. One regional difference already acknowledged by Taaladvies is using *diegene* as a gender-neutral pronoun. This practise is quite common in the Netherlands but is hardly used in Belgium. E.g., “*Diegene had net dezelfde jas als mijn professor*” (“They had the same jacket as my professor”).

One of the main advantages of using the neuter gender is that it is a feature which is already existent within the language, and it would not present as much of a change as neo-pronouns would. This concern has been raised by several academics and activists (Hekanaho, 2020; Park, 2014; Wehle, 2020). Another popular and closely related argument against adopting a gender-neutral pronoun is that pronouns belong to a closed word class, that is, a word class that is so deeply interwoven into the fabric of the language that it would be near impossible to add a new pronoun or adapt an existing one (Blaubergs, 1980; Parks & Robertson, 1998; Van Oostdorp, 2023; Waszink, 2022). Hekanaho also suggests that adapting already existing language for non-binary use might be easier than introducing new language as people might be more accepting to expand a word’s usage. Both of these arguments are contradicted by the inclusion of *hen* into Swedish. *Hen* is a neopronoun, closely related to the existing *hon* (she) and *han* (he) mixed with *den* (it). *Hen* is also said to (phonetically) resemble the only, and thus gender-neutral, pronoun in Finnish, *hän*. One advantage *hen* had over other languages looking into officially adding gender-neutral pronouns is that using *hen* was first proposed in the 1960’s and later brought up again in the 2000’s (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015; Hord, 2016). The pronoun had already been discussed for an extended period of time before it was officially added to the Swedish Academy Glossary (SAOL).

Marie Gustafsson Sendén, Emma A. Bäck and Anna Lindqvist (2015) looked at how the gender-neutral pronoun was received by the Swedish public over a four-year timespan. They found that time had a great impact on how *hen* was used and on the attitudes on the pronoun. Although there was backlash in the first years the pronoun was introduced, attitudes soon changed. The conditions in Sweden at the start of the research are similar to those we now see in Belgium and the Netherlands. Gender-neutral pronouns are discussed in the media and the leading language authority has published statements on the topic. The improvement in attitudes and use are promising future prospects for Dutch and other languages.

The literature on gender-neutral language creates a hopeful image. The work by Blaubergs (1980), Gustafsson Sendén et al. (2015), Hekanaho (2020), and Parks & Robertson (1998) show that languages are open to change and that they can change in relatively short periods of time, as was the case in Sweden where attitudes positively changed after only four years (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015). People are also willing to change their attitudes on grammaticality in order to be inclusive (Hekanaho, 2020).

Non-binary language and pronouns

One of the first pieces of academic research into the reception of non-binary pronouns in Dutch translation was done by Lette Vos and Tia Nutters. The results of their research were published in a 2022 issue of *Filter*, a Dutch-language academic journal on translation. Vos translated the English-language novel *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo into Dutch. One of the characters, Morgan, uses *they/them* pronouns. The struggles Vos faced while translating this relatively uncharted territory of the Dutch language piqued the interest of Tia Nutters, an academic at the University of Groningen, and she reached out. Together, they tested the consequences of two sets of Dutch non-binary pronouns by spreading a questionnaire among colleague translators. The two sets they used were *die/hun* and *hen/hun*, the latter being the one used in the official translation. Both options were selected from the 2016 *Transgender Netwerk Nederland* survey which sought to find a consensus on a Dutch pronoun to refer to non-binary people. In the survey, the pronouns *hen/hen/hun* received the most votes, but many non-binary voters indicated that *die/hen/hun* was also a viable option (Transgender Netwerk Nederland, 2016). Vos and Nutters also discussed other options, including suggestions from participants in their survey and suggestions raised by other translators belonging to a Facebook group of Dutch translators. These were: *die/diens*, *hen* with the neologism *hens* as possessive pronoun, and neopronouns such as *xij*.

Vos and Nutters based their questionnaire on Guerberof-Arenas and Toral (2020), who developed their survey in order to test the impact of machine translation and post-editing on the reading experience of Dutch and Catalan readers. Guerberof-Arenas and Toral included scales from other validated surveys: the 12-item narrative engagement scale from Busselle and Bilandzic (2009), parts from the 4-item enjoyment section from Hakemulder (2004), and the 3-item mental imagery section from Kuijpers et al. (2014). Guerberof-Arenas and Toral also developed four questions to test translation reception. The questionnaire Vos and Nutters (2022) used had less items than the one by Guerberof-Arenas and Toral (2020), and several items were slightly different. Vos and Nutters also added a few questions on gender association and on what the participants thought of the pronouns, both in the fragment and in general.

The results were contradictory at times and Vos and Nutters (2022) concluded that there was no clear preference for either *hen/hun* or *die/hun*. For several of the individual topics, there was a preference to one specific option, but these also changed from one topic to another. The questionnaire consisted of four main parts: demographical data, questions concerning the content of the fragment to check if the participants read carefully, narrative engagement (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009), and questions regarding the non-binary pronouns.

The 119 respondents were not very representative of the whole Dutch-speaking population. Most respondents were academically schooled women aged between 35 and 65 living in the Netherlands. They also reported to be close to transgender or non-binary people and they read often, and many had a language-related profession. This sample is fairly representative for the average adult reader of fiction in the Netherlands. Vos and Nutters (2022) suggested that a similar study with a Young Adult novel

might be interesting, with inclusion of the pronouns *die/diens* (p. 7). With this thesis, I will attempt to fill this gap and also focus on a different respondent: the Dutch-speaking Belgian teenage reader.

The third part of Vos and Nutters' research used the narrative engagement scale by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009). Narrative engagement is used to measure a reader's level of immersion, or transportation, in a story. High transportation has been proven to positively affect beliefs expressed in the story and increase empathy towards the protagonists (Green & Brock, 2000; Johnson, 2013). This means that high transportation in a story with a positively portrayed non-binary protagonist will likely increase positive attitudes on non-binary people in real life. Narrative engagement is measured in four subscales: narrative understanding, attentional focus, narrative presence, and emotional engagement. Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) define narrative understanding as "narrative realism and cognitive perspective taking items, and describes how viewers make sense of or understand the narrative" (2009, p. 331). Attentional focus measures how focused or distracted respondents were while consuming the tested media. Emotional engagement relates to the "emotions viewers have with respect to the characters, either feeling the characters' emotions (empathy) or feeling for them (sympathy)" (2009, p. 331). The last measure, narrative presence, is related to disassociating from the real world and becoming immersed in the story world.

Vos and Nutters' (2022) results suggest that the narrative understanding when using *hen/hun* pronouns is lower than with *die/hun* pronouns. The readers in the experiment themselves also report having trouble with understanding the text, both from the *die/hun* and the *hen/hun* group. As for narrative understanding, they found conflicting results between self-reports of the respondents and the control questions. More *die/hun* readers report having trouble understanding the fragments, while they scored higher on the questions regarding the content of the fragment. The narrative presence and emotional engagement were stronger for the *hen/hun* readers. They were marginally more present in the narrative world, and they were also slightly more affected by the story. For attentional focus, the groups switched again: *die/hun* readers were to some degree less likely to be distracted while reading the story.

Next, Vos and Nutters (2022) explored how the respondents reacted to the new use of these pronouns, as the use is traditionally not grammatically correct. Around half of the respondents of both versions found the text grammatically correct and they enjoyed the style. Most replies stated that they had no gendered associations with Morgan and the majority of the people who had gendered associations found Morgan female. Vos and Nutters think this might be related to references of Morgan's assigned gender at birth, such as mentioning Morgan's top surgery.

The responses to the question "How did you experience the non-binary pronoun" were mostly neutral in Vos and Nutters' (2022) study. Around half of the respondents mentioned that they got used to the pronouns. Several people expressed negative comments about the pronouns but there were also respondents in favour. The *die/hun* readers were more outspoken in voicing their opinions on the pronouns than the *hen/hun* readers. Some respondents mentioned their dislike for *die* as it might be

'less human', a concern also raised by Wehle (2020) for Czech. The disadvantages discussed by Taaladvies.net (b) (n.d.) as discussed in the introduction were also raised by some of the readers.

Similar, but more exhaustive research was done in the master's thesis 'Breaking the Silence: Translating Non-binary Identities in Literary Texts from English to Czech' (Wehle, 2020). Wehle wanted to find translation strategies for translating non-binary identities from English into Czech. First, they had discussions with Czech non-binary people to find possible strategies. Excerpts from the Young Adult novel *I Wish You All the Best* by Mason Deaver were then used to test these strategies. An online questionnaire with these translated excerpts was spread among Czech non-binary readers to get immediate feedback from the group affected by this translation and its translation choices. Wehle wanted to raise awareness of such identities existing, and thus urged Czech society to find a gender-neutral way of expression suitable for such identities.

Wehle (2020) settled on nine translation strategies spread out on an acceptance-resistance continuum: two acceptance strategies, four middle strategies and three resistance strategies. Acceptance strategies, on the one hand, fit in with the already existing language structures and do not challenge the status quo of the language. The resistance strategies, on the other hand, openly defy language norms in an attempt to visualise the notion of gender non-conformity. The middle strategies sit between the extremes of resistance and acceptance. I will briefly discuss these strategies in the following paragraphs as Wehle compiled an inspiring and detailed list for exploring gender-neutral language. The use of these strategies must be studied with the source text and the target language in mind as some strategies rely on specific features that might not exist in certain languages. The context of the non-binary character and their relationship with certain pronouns must also be considered.

The two acceptance strategies were (1) using the gender assigned at birth and (2) bypassing all gendered phrases (Wehle, 2020). Neither of these options are very viable. The former does not seem faithful to a non-binary person or character who explicitly states that they prefer *they/them* pronouns. The latter option costs the translator significantly more effort and presents problems regarding readability because of the clunky constructions sometimes needed to avoid gendered terms. Both options could be used in Dutch as well. The second strategy might even be more fit for Dutch as it has less instances where gender must be explicitly stated compared to Czech or French for example. Rose (2021) also experimented with this strategy in her book *Translating Trans Identity: (Re)Writing Undecidable Texts and Bodies*.

The middle strategies are: (3) using the opposite of the gender a character was assigned at birth, (4) using the neuter grammatical gender, (5) switching between feminine and masculine gender and (6) using the third person plural instead of the singular (Wehle, 2020). These strategies all have their advantages and disadvantages. When using the opposite gender of the gender the character was assigned at birth, the same problem is presented as with using the gender assigned at birth. It might be interpreted as misgendering the character and it thus sends the wrong message towards the (young)

reader. Switching between the feminine and masculine gender is useful in languages where there are more specific gendered expressions, but it would be a less efficient strategy in Dutch. While it does emphasise that the character does not belong to a single gender, it also stays within the gender binary. The last middle strategy, using the plural instead of the singular, is comparable to what is done in English. The pronoun *they* is mostly seen as referring to the plural. The Dutch *hen* is also traditionally a plural pronoun. A more in-depth analysis of strategy four, using the neuter gender, was presented in the previous section.

The three resistance strategies are: (7) using the opposite grammatical gender for a gendered noun and thus changing the structure of said noun, (8) using new grammatical structures and (9) graphic adjustments of gendered expressions (Wehle, 2020). While using the opposite grammatical gender for a gendered noun stays within the gender binary, it feels very radical, and it invents new words. This strategy is limited to languages which have grammatically gendered structures, which is only partly the case with Dutch, making this strategy less effective in the Dutch case. The eighth strategy is also language-dependent, as the translator must invent new grammatical structures. The amount of grammatically gendered words is also an important factor, as a grammatically gendered language has more instances where these new structures must be applied than a grammatically neutral language. The frequency of these structures will also help with the normalization of these new structures (Koeser et al., 2015; Moreland & Topolinski, 2010; Zajonc, 1968). The last strategy stands out the most visually. There are several options, including asterisks, gender gaps and a new font with gender symbols. Some languages have already experimented with these graphic adjustments, such as German and French, to varying success (Knisely, 2020; Lardelli, 2023; Waszink, 2022). These changes are sometimes used to enforce (visual) equality between the sexes, but some could also be used for non-binary people. Rose (2021) designed a font with graphic adjustments which she used in translations from French to illustrate the shifting from one gender into another in French. The main issue with these is readability as these structures look strange to the eye. Graphic adjustments are also impossible to pronounce, so it would not be a universal solution.

One strategy from each category was used in the questionnaire where Wehle (2020) wanted to look at how these strategies would be received by non-binary readers. These were (1) using the gender assigned at birth, (4) using the neuter grammatical gender, and (9) graphic adjustments of gendered expressions. The opinions on all options were divided, but most respondents personally preferred the graphic adjustment. The neuter gender ranked last; most respondents marked it as the least personally suited for them. Using the gender assessed at birth was in all aspects the middle. It received the least votes on 'suits me the best' but almost equal votes on 'suits me the least' and 'in the middle'. Some respondents also gave other options they preferred, but most of these options are not very viable for Dutch, such as using the majestic plural when talking in first person or using neopronouns and complementary new grammatical forms.

It is quite surprising that using the gender assigned at birth was seemingly preferred over the neuter gender. Wehle explains this:

[T]his might stem from the idea that while the use of a binary gender erases the character's gender identity, the use of a neuter evokes dehumanization or infantilization of the character at the expense of gender-neutralization. In other words, the respondents have shown a desire to be treated as human beings in literary texts, even if it means that their characters might lose a part or the whole of their gender identity. (Wehle, 2020, p. 99)

Other reasons might include not wanting to trouble cisgender readers with new language phenomena. Several studies (Hekanaho, 2020; Stetie & Zunino, 2022) have suggested that this might not be as big of an hinderance for people as some fear. The wish of non-binary people to be treated as human is paramount in deciding which strategy to use when translating non-binary characters and should be respected as much as possible as narratives are a powerful tool in helping normalise language.

Like Czech, French is also a very grammatically gendered language. Knisely (2020) researched what language non-binary French speakers use to refer to themselves and what language they prefer to be referred to with by others. I will present a short summary of his findings to show the extent to which non-binary Francophones have found gender-neutral alternatives. Some language used by Knisely's respondents also correspond to the strategies suggested by Wehle (2020). This shows that some of these strategies might be viable for Czech and other similarly grammatically gendered languages.

Around half of the respondents used *iel* (or spelling variant *yel*) as pronoun, sometimes in combination with another pronoun. A small third used the traditional gendered pronouns *il* or *elle*. The other respondents used other neopronouns such as *ael*, *al*, *ol* (or *øl*) or no pronouns. There was also a small portion that was indifferent to their pronouns.

There was great variation in verb agreement. Some respondents reported using traditional agreement (female pronoun – female agreement), others switched the gender of the pronoun with the gender of the agreement (female pronoun – male agreement). Other options were a non-binary pronoun with a traditional agreement, a binary pronoun with a new form of agreement (such as *allé.e*), a non-binary pronoun and a new form of agreement. There were also respondents that mixed all pronouns or avoided pronouns altogether.

For a direct object pronoun, most respondents named *læ*, but with different pronunciations. *Læ* was also picked as definitive article, with *un.e* as most popular indefinite article, some spelling variants were also suggested. Options for disjunctive and demonstrative pronouns were the neologisms *ellui* (singular) and *elleux* (plural). For singular possessive pronouns, the majority of respondents used *maon*, *taon* and *saon*.

Knisely (2020) also tested the reception of several instances of non-binary language among non-binary and binary French speakers. All forms were found to be comprehensible and, in general, the non-binary respondents rated the comprehensibility slightly higher than the binary respondents. For several of the options, the concern that the suggested option was a combination of the male and female form was raised. Several respondents would like a unique non-binary form but Knisely notes: “forms that substantially departed from the binary were often critiqued for incongruence with existing language structures” (Knisely, 2020, p. 869). Pronunciation was also an issue as some of these options had the same pronunciation as their gendered variant.

Almost all language presently used by French non-binary people are newly invented words, mostly constructed out of already existing vocabulary. *lel* for example is a combination of the existing female pronoun *elle* and the male pronoun *il*. The Swedish non-binary pronoun *hen* was constructed in a similar way. This shows that broadening the use of presently available language is not the only viable option for Dutch and other languages exploring gender-neutral and non-binary language.

Miltersen (2018) inventoried Danish gender-neutral language used by non-binary Danes, and by women and men who use other pronouns than the ones traditionally assigned to their gender. They found that *de*, third person plural, was the most popular gender-neutral pronoun by a large majority. *Hen*, newly entered into Danish because of Swedish influence, was also used. Some participants explained this choice by pointing out the phonetical and visual closeness to the existing Danish gendered pronouns *hun* (she) and *han* (he). The last gender-neutral option was *den*, the common gender third person singular, mostly used to refer to objects and animals. A common argument for using *den* was to oppose the dehumanising aspect of it. Miltersen also found, just like in French, that combining pronouns was very popular. Half of the respondents used gendered pronouns in combination with a gender-neutral pronoun such as *hen*, *den* or *de*. Miltersen suggests this might be related to the respondents living in more remote areas where they would have to use gendered pronouns as not to be ostracised.

German also struggles with non-binary language in a similar way other grammatically gendered languages as French and Czech do. Katrin Waldhart’s article “Stuck in the Binary: Heteronormativity and the Binary Conception of Gender in German-Language Trans YA” (2021) studied three Young-Adult books whose protagonists fall beyond the gender binary and the language used to describe these characters. The novels Waldhart studied were German-language originals and not translations from a more gender-neutral language like English. Authors have more liberties to experiment with new language forms and with the structure of the text than translators normally have. One such example is that all authors used the first-person perspective for their gender-nonconforming main characters to avoid using too many gendered phrases. When other characters described the protagonists, however, these characters must use gendered language. Mostly the authors used both male and female referents, but one book played more with these constraints than the others and invented a new pronoun, *SEHR*. This pronoun was not used throughout the whole text, but only appeared briefly in a scene where the

main character is playing around with their friends. Waldhart's (2021) study shows that German authors unfortunately do not experiment often with new or adapted language for gender-nonconforming people.

For English, Hekanaho (2020) found that singular *they* was also preferred as non-binary pronoun, although by a lesser margin than with the generic pronoun. Neopronouns were also not favoured here. Hord (2016) found that *they* was a preferred pronoun for a large portion of their genderqueer respondents. They conclude: "[t]he popularity of they [...] shows that it has already become something of a 'standard' or neutral pronoun in English speaking transgender communities and is perhaps more easily understood outside of them because it is already a part of the language" (Hord, 2016, p. 17). This is in line with the other languages presented in this study so far. Most languages choose vocabulary that is either already existing and try to 'repurpose' it or tend to create new forms that are closely related to the existing forms.

On a wider scale, some of these strategies are not usable as they cannot be pronounced out loud. This renders the gender-neutral language less helpful as a tool to make non-binary pronouns more widely used and accepted. Examples of gender-neutral language that can be applied in written text but not in the spoken word include: the Spanish gender-neutral marker -x, the French punctuated suffixation (IPS) such as *allé.e*, the Binnen-I, the gender gap, the Sylvain system or the ens-forms in German or Rose's experimental methods including the palimpsest, hypertext, lipogram or cut-out technique as ways to introduce gender in the gender-neutral English (Knisely, 2020; Lardelli, 2023; Rose, 2021; Stetie & Zunino, 2022; Waszink, 2022).

Some of these options are not very practical to read either. Wehle cites Czech blogger Bregantová (2020): "[a] thick novel full of asterisks or neologisms could hardly achieve what a novel containing non-binary characters aims for, that is mediating a certain life experience, widening the reader's horizon and creating a sense of belonging²" (Wehle, 2020, p. 46). This is even more true regarding literature aimed at children and young adults. The worry regarding readability is shared by the translators in Lardelli (2023) study regarding gender-inclusive characters in German. In order to choose a form of non-binary language for universal use, one must also keep in mind the readability and the practicality for day-to-day use which can be found in pronunciation, among other factors. As presented in this overview, respondents across several countries prefer non-binary vocabulary to be related to already existing language, it should ideally also be clearly readable and easy to pronounce.

This overview of gender-neutral and non-binary language used by and for genderqueer people in different languages illustrates how some strategies of adapting vocabulary can be found in multiple languages. Common techniques are coining a portmanteau of existing gendered pronouns (i.e., *iel*, *hen*) and broadening the use of existing language to include non-binary people (i.e., *de*, *they*). The solutions are often language specific, but the strategies are similar. It also seems like languages with higher degrees of grammatical gender tend to use more linguistic innovation in order to make room for gender-

² Translation from Czech into English by (Wehle, 2020)

queer and non-binary people within the language. Non-binary language in these languages also tends to be written-only. Another trend seen across multiple languages is the tendency of non-binary people using multiple pronouns. This is often expressed by using a gendered pronoun alongside a non-binary pronoun. This might be an option for translation as well, but one might risk confusion as the referent might be unclear. The character's use of multiple pronouns is best stated in the text or in a footnote explaining the unusual reference.

Literature as an influence on the real world

Several sources have expressed the positive impact reading a story with queer characters can have on young minds (Capuzza, 2020; Epstein & Chapman, 2021; Van Poucke, 2021; Waldhart, 2021). As Capuzza put it: "Media not only preserve or reinforce gender normativity; they have the potential to promote social change" (Capuzza, 2020, p. 324). In my own bachelor's thesis (Van Poucke, 2021), I stressed the social importance of a translation that focuses on representation, especially when the translation is aimed at children or young adults. One way to ensure qualitative representation is by referring back to the people that are being represented. For the case of non-binary pronouns, this could be done by looking at the pronouns the non-binary community already uses in the target language.

Rutherford, Johanson, and Reddan (2022) looked at the importance of representation in relation to authors writing about their own experiences. They stressed the importance of authentic portrayals of marginalised groups: "Failures of recognition, of which stereotypical characterization in literature and art are prime examples, damage subjects' relationship to their concepts of self" (Rutherford et al., 2022, p. 575). This is especially important when writing or translating for a young(er) audience. Translators have an important role in conveying the recognition into the target language and must thus make informed translation decisions in order to portray the character as faithful to the non-stereotypical original.

Literature has also been found to increase positive feelings towards people in groups to which the reader does not belong (Green & Brock, 2000; Johnson, 2013; Kuzmičová et al., 2017). This could be explained through the concept of transportation, the extent to which readers are absorbed in a story and lose track of the real world. Transportation theory (Green et al., 2004) explains this increase in positive attitudes towards beliefs expressed in a story. Johnson (2013) found that transportation into a narrative had a positive impact on reducing stereotyping and prejudice of Arab-Muslims. Even people with high prejudice could relate to the story and the main character and thus had fewer negative feelings towards Arab-Muslims post-reading. Johnson's results showed that affective empathy was the biggest factor in reducing prejudice. Kuzmičová et al. (2017) found that style had no real impact on empathy. This suggests that reading a text, no matter its genre, can improve the readers ability to relate to groups of people they do not belong to and to issues that they themselves have not experienced. Regarding the current study, this means that reading a text with a non-binary character who uses non-binary pronouns presumably increases acceptance towards this group and their language.

Aside from increasing empathy, McNeil (2008) sees reading as a trial for real-life situations, as it presents the young reader with “opportunities to explore unfamiliar realities, an especially intimate experience when that reality is embodied in the narrator” (2008, p. 91). Reading about certain unfamiliar experiences can give the reader means to help influence the real world for the better.

Several languages share issues relating to the use and adaption of non-binary pronouns in everyday language. The biggest problem is that the options chosen by the non-binary communities in these languages are often contested due to concerns about readability. Regarding this, Wehle raises the importance of the translator: “However, the translator could potentially be the one giving the community a new voice by pushing the language stemming from the community towards a new standard” (Wehle, 2020, p. 10). This sentiment is shared by Lardelli (2023). As a member of the queer community myself, I am personally invested in the importance of good representation. As a student of translation and future translator, I have been given a tool to help realise this representation. For my bachelor’s thesis, I studied the literature on gender-neutral and non-binary translation strategies. I found there was little research on this topic and, perhaps related, that not many books featuring non-binary characters have been published in Dutch, translations or original Dutch-language works. My master’s thesis is a continuation of this, but with the practical aim of adding one more piece of non-binary literature into Dutch.

Hord (2016) poses that shifting gender-neutral language from a queer-only language into the mainstream may help normalising it. This thesis is supported by the conclusions of Gustafsson Sendén et al. (2015) on the changed attitudes of the Swedish pronoun *hen*. Literature and literature in translation is one way to help shift the language into the mainstream. Hekanaho (2020) also found that the attitude towards transgender and gender non-conforming people was linked with their willingness to accept non-binary pronouns. Ideally this would also be true in the opposite direction: accepting non-binary pronouns will lead likely to more acceptance of transgender people.

The *mere exposure effect*, first discussed by Robert Zajonc in 1968, argues that higher exposure to a phenomenon increases the likability. Many studies later confirmed Zajonc’s hypothesis, as discussed in Moreland and Tropolinski (2010). The second generation of research into this effect points to *processing fluency* as cause, seeing that the repetition of a stimulus, and thus repetition of processing said stimulus, increases this processing fluency, which makes the experiencer feel good. Because of this fluency, a more positive affect towards the repeated phenomenon is created which can be seen in an increase of the likability, among other things. This means that exposure to non-binary pronouns in literature can influence positive attitudes towards said pronouns.

On a similar note, Koeser, Kuhn and Sczesny (2015) looked at how reading a text with gender-fair language impacted the usage of said language in the writing of women and men in German. They found that after reading a text with gender-fair language, i.e., both female and male forms of nouns and neutral nouns, women used more gender-fair forms in their own writing. Men used more gender-fair language when they were made aware of this language after reading the text. This indicates that even just reading

can impact the use of certain language, especially for female readers. Koeser et al. (2015) suspect this is related to the higher importance for women to also feel included. In light of my study specifically, their findings mean that reading texts with non-binary pronouns could increase the use of these pronouns in other writing and thus contribute to the normalization.

Methodology

Conceptual framework

The questionnaire used concepts from the narrative engagement scale by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009). Narrative engagement is measured by four overlapping categories: narrative understanding (understanding the plot), attentional focus (not being distracted), narrative presence (being inside the story world), and emotional engagement (the story affecting the reader's emotions). Each of these categories is tested by three questions, e.g., "*Ik dacht soms aan andere dingen terwijl ik aan het lezen was.*" ("While reading, I found myself thinking about other things"). The survey used the Dutch translations by Guerberof-Arenas and Toral, but the wording was sometimes slightly altered to accommodate the young audience. Guerberof-Arenas and Toral (2020) and Hakemulder (2004) warn that errors may negatively impact attentional focus, and consequently decrease enjoyment and transportation. One risk regarding non-binary pronouns is that they may be seen as ungrammatical and thus may trigger this negative evaluation.

Kuijpers et al. (2014) mental imagery section tests the story's ability to create vivid mental images in the readers' mind. The questionnaire created for this study used the three items from the study by Kuijpers et al, as used by Guerberof-Arenas and Toral (2020). Following Vos and Nutters (2022) I added two questions focusing on the gendered connotations the non-binary protagonist may evoke, e.g., "*Ik heb Chih ervaren als mannelijk*" ("I experienced Chih as masculine").

Lastly, four questions regarding translation reception were taken from Guerberof-Arenas and Toral (2020). They developed these questions to test the reception of machine translated and post-edited texts. I followed Vos and Nutters's (2022) adaptation of these questions, e.g., "*Ik heb het fragment ervaren als grammaticaal juist*" ("I experienced this fragment as grammatically correct").

Materials and procedure

The participants read one of my translations of the first chapter of *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* by Nghi Vo (2020). The first chapter was chosen because the reader is introduced to the story world and the main character, Chih. An additional benefit of the first chapter was that the frame narrative typical of this story had not started yet and therefore this chapter had the highest number of non-binary pronouns. Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) also suggested using the pilot or the first episodes when they developed the narrative engagement scale.

For this study, three versions of the translation were made. The only changes in these versions were the pronouns used to refer to Chih. In this way, the translation only has one variable. The different sets of pronouns were *die/hen/hun*, *hen/hen/hun* and *die/die/diens*. The first two options were the winning sets of the 2016 *Transgender Netwerk Nederland* survey and were also used by Vos and Nutters (2022)

in their research. The last set, *die/die/diens*, is gaining more popularity and is used by various non-binary people. Vos and Nutters (2022, p. 7) also suggested using this set. All these options were also included in Taaladvies' guidelines on language and gender (Taaladvies.net (a), n.d.).

The participants completed a Qualtrics survey largely based on a blend of the questionnaires used by Vos and Nutters (2022) and Guerberof-Arenas and Toral (2020) as discussed above. The first part of my questionnaire focused on the demographics of the participants, such as age and province of residence. It also asked what the students studied at school to ascertain whether there was a difference between respondents from language-focused programmes and the non-language-focused programmes. It also included questions regarding reading patterns, such as "how often do you read?" and "in which language do you read the most often?".

The next section tested reading comprehension and included a question on the order of events as they happened in the fragment and a question on the chronology of Chih's feelings in the story. There were also eight true-or-false questions about the plot. These questions checked if the respondents read the fragment carefully and if they understood everything correctly. The third section included the twelve-item Narrative Engagement questionnaire by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009); as translated by Guerberof-Arenas and Toral with slight adaptations to ensure the young respondents understood the questions. The respondents were asked to answer on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "completely do not agree" to "completely agree". The following section included questions on grammaticality and stylistic enjoyment based on Vos and Nutters (2022). The fifth part consisted of Kuijpers et al.'s (2014) mental imagery section and questions on the gendered connotations of Chih. Lastly, there were three open questions on the non-binary pronouns as in the questionnaire used by Vos and Nutters (2022).

The structure of the questionnaire and the formulations of the questions were largely based on Vos and Nutters (2022) combined with the questionnaire by Guerberof-Arenas and Toral. There were a few changes, such as the content questions, which were adapted to fit my fragment, and the demographics questions, which were more specifically aimed at students in secondary education. As mentioned above, there were also slight language changes in order to increase the comprehension by the young participants.

Participants were not informed that non-binary pronouns were the focus of the survey, instead they were told that the study aimed to research the reading experience of young adults while reading a translated fantasy novel marketed towards their age group. Following SMEC guidelines, as much as transparency as possible had to be provided and thus it was disclosed that the text was a translation.

Participants

As the intended participant was between sixteen and eighteen years old, and thus underage, ethical clearance from SMEC was needed. The clearance was granted under case number G-2023-6717. Before starting the questionnaire, all respondents had to consent via an informed consent page. On this

page, there was a link to a downloadable document with all information regarding the research. A copy of this document is available in the appendix. This informed consent document was also available at the end of the questionnaire. The questionnaire asked explicit content at three points: once before starting the questionnaire, with informed consent document, again when the fragment was shown and once again at the very last page with the repeat link for the informed consent page. The questionnaire is also available in the appendix.

A post was made asking teachers to spread the link for the survey amongst their students on KlasCement, a website hosted by the Flemish Government where teachers can exchange teaching resources and ask questions. I also reached out to schools individually by searching Google Maps for secondary schools and emailing them. Unfortunately, only a few responded positively.

In total there were 221 responses, of which 113 participants did not fill out more than 50% of the questions. All participants had to be older than 16 years because of ethical concerns regarding informed consent, as mentioned. Respondents older than 19 no longer fit the target audience and were also omitted from the analysis. This meant that eight respondents were filtered out on the basis of age: three were 15 years old, three were older than 19 years old and two who clicked the option 'other age' without specifying their age.

In order to stress the voluntary character of the research, participants could skip all questions except when consent was asked. Before moving on to the next question, a reminder was shown indicating that one or multiple questions were unanswered to minimize the chances of questions being left unanswered because of inattentiveness. Four respondents skipped one or more questions. One respondent did not fill out two out of three reading comprehension questions and two out of seven questions regarding narrative engagement. Two respondents skipped one or two sub questions in either the reading comprehension questions or the narrative engagement questions. The last respondent did not fill out one question of the narrative engagement questions. The results are based on the 100 complete, non-omitted responses.

Analysis of *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* by Nghi Vo

Before moving to the results and discussion, I will provide a brief analysis of *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* and my translation of the first chapter of the first five chapters, including a discussion of translation challenges. *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* is a novella by American author Nghi Vo. The story is the first instalment of the Singing Hills Cycle which follow cleric Chih as they collect stories for the Singing Hill abbey's archives (N. Vo, 2024b). In the *Emperess of Salt and Fortune*, Chih uncovers the story about the eponymous empress through meeting her handmaiden, Rabbit, in the compound to which the empress was once banished. The novella won multiple awards, including the 2021 Hugo Award for Best Novella (N. Vo, 2024a).

The story recalls the history of In-yo, the Empress of Salt and Fortune, through the stories Rabbit tells Chih and Almost Brilliant. Chih is a cleric from the Singing Hill abbey who stopped by the Thriving Fortune compound on their way to Kailin, where the new empress will have her first Dragon Court. When they arrive, Chih meets Rabbit. Over the course of the story, Rabbit tells the story of her life and how she played a role in empress In-yo's ascent to the throne.

As a young girl, Rabbit was sent to the capital for a life of servitude as her province was not able to fulfil the quota of orange dye. She was appointed as cleaner in the women's quarters at the age of ten and became In-yo's servant. The two quickly formed a bond after In-yo noticed a rebellious streak in Rabbit, as she dared to look at In-yo when she first came to the palace (N. Vo, 2020,p.24) and voiced her own opinion when asked about the gold plate gifted by the emperor (p. 38). Rabbit was tasked with guarding In-yo's quarters when she discussed designs and had an amorous relation with artist Yan Lian (p. 39). The following morning, during In-yo's bath, they had a heartfelt conversation after which Rabbit mentally pledged her alliance to In-yo by swearing In-yo would never be alone again if Rabbit could help it (p. 41).

Empress In-yo was the princess of the northern lands and entered a political marriage with the emperor of Anh, emperor Sung, after they defeated the north in battle. After In-yo gave birth to a son, the emperor banished her to Thriving Fortune as the political allegiances were secure with a northern son (p. 44-45). During her pregnancy, In-yo grows obsessed with fortune-telling (p. 37). Later it is revealed that this was the start of a ploy in order to communicate with her people in the north and stage a coup. During her banishment in Thriving Fortune, where she took Rabbit with her as her servant, she continued plotting the coup d'état.

During the several years at Thriving Fortune, Rabbit falls in love with one of the fortune-teller spies called Sukai. He was killed as revenge on In-yo, but not before Rabbit became pregnant with his child (p. 101).

When In-yo took over the Anh empire, she returned to the capital with a baby in her arms. The child was said to be conceived by emperor Sung in a dream, as a way to legitimise her claim to the throne (p.113), but Rabbit's story revealed that it was her and Sukai's baby.

Chih's role as cleric means they are tasked with registering history by attending events such as festivals and inventorying the locations they visit but also by listening to the stories of ordinary people. They are helped in this task by neixins, talking hoopoes that have remarkable memories. As Chih explains on page 26: "I listen, and Almost Brilliant will remember" (N. Vo, 2020). Clerics are trained to wait out stories and small histories and link all the different parts to each other and the big history. In the case for the story told in *The Empress of Salt and Fortune*, Rabbit's tale slowly uncovers the impact of "silenced and nameless" women (p. 86).

All chapters except the first, sixth, and last one consist of three levels and spread over four parts within the chapter. It starts with an italicised inventory of items in Thriving Fortune. The style of these inventories is very dry; it only lists the items and what they are made of. The second level, and second and fourth parts, are a conversation between Chih and Rabbit triggered by one of the inventoried items. These parts are narrated by a selective omniscient narrator and there is focalisation of Chih. It is in these parts that most non-binary pronouns can be found. The last level, and third part of the chapter, has Rabbit as narrator and is written in first person as she takes the reader back to her past.

The story world is "inspired by East Asian and Southeast Asian history and mythology" (N. Vo, 2024b) and features several fantasy elements connected to these cultures. This was a first translation hurdle. In chapter two, Chih and Rabbit eat a meal of pounded rice flavoured with birch water (p.22). I could not find any real dish that mentioned either ingredient, so it was hard to imagine what the dish would look like. I translated it as *gestampte rijst* (pounded rice) and *berkensap* (birch sap/juice). I chose for *sap* instead of *water* because I thought the birch water was meant to be the liquid tapped from the birch trees. The word *sap* in Dutch also has two meanings, sap and juice, so this translation still has some of the ambiguity of the original.

The translations of the names were also interesting. Many of the names are ordinary words, such as the names for the locations and the names of the neixins. These names often can also be interpreted in more than one way. Chih's neixin is called Almost Brilliant, for example. In my first draft, I translated this as *Bijna Fonkelend* but this lacked the double meaning of brilliant, which can mean both 'very smart' and 'very bright'. *Fonkelend* only translated the latter meaning. The translation I chose in the end was *Nagenoeg Briljant*. The Dutch adjective *briljant* also has both meanings, but the adverb *nagenoeg* is more uncommon and a bit stronger than *bijna*. *Bijna* is the most used translation for almost, but I found the name *Nagenoeg Briljant* more fitting and official than *Bijna Briljant*. A similar issue arose with the names for Almost Brilliant parents; the names in English carry status and severity, so it was important to choose words in Dutch that have the same weight.

The translation of ‘fortune’ was a hurdle as well. The story plays with the double meaning of the word and it is of great importance for the plot. The ambiguous meaning is already hinted at in the title of the book and In-yo’s title: the Empress of Salt and Fortune. At first glance, the name refers to the generous dowry full of riches In-yo brought to emperor Sung when they wed, which was described as “one of the finest dowries ever to come to an emperor of Anh” (p. 25). As the story progresses, the importance of fortune-telling is revealed, and it could be argued that the fortune also refers to fortune-telling. The word is also in the name of the compound In-yo is banished to, Thriving Fortune. Rabbit calls it a refuge and a war camp (p. 83) as it is the place where they planned the coup, but the name originates from an ironic joke made by the female attendants who were sent there from the capital to attend to In-yo (p. 17). The name is very symbolic here as well. Because the word ‘fortune’ is used in so many ways with the ambiguous meanings often playing a role, it was very important to find a fitting translation.

As there is no direct translation for the double meanings of ‘fortune’ in Dutch, I had to be a bit creative to make the link between the different mentions clear. The translation for ‘fortune’ in the sense of fortune-telling is *lot* and the act ‘fortune-telling’ as *waarzeggerij*. *Lot* only means fate so it could not be used in In-yo’s title. For the ‘fortune’ in her title, I used the word *voorspoed*, which is a direct translation of prosperity, but it can also be used in the context of fortune-telling. There were two instances of ‘fortune-telling’ in the text where I linked the two terms to make the connection between *voorspoed* and *lot* a bit more obvious to the Dutch reader:

1. ST: “After the announcement, the empress seemed to grow obsessed with **fortune-telling of all kinds**.” (p.37)
 TT: Na de aankondiging werd de keizerin geobsedeerd door **waarzeggerij om haar lot en voorspoed** te voorspellen.

2. ST: “my mother had **read the fortunes** of the great and the small alike between her chores” (p. 44)
 TT: hoe mijn moeder tussen haar klusjes door **voorspeldde of er voorspoed lag in het leven** van zowel de groten als de kleinen.

In the first example, ‘fortune-telling of all kinds’ is translated as ‘fortune-telling to predict her fate and prosperity’. The second example utilizes the combination of the verb *voorspellen* (predict), which is commonly used in Dutch in regard to fortune-telling like reading is in English, and *voorspoed* for what is predicted in these fortunes. These translation solutions are less common in Dutch compared to things like ‘*de toekomst voorspellen*’ but they are more useful in this translation as they help connect the different types of ‘fortune’ important to this story.

For the translation of Thriving Fortune, I also combined *voorspoed* and *lot* in *Voorspoedig Lot*. This has a double meaning in Dutch as well as *lot* can mean ‘fate’, but in Belgian Dutch the word is also used to refer to a plot of land. It can thus be interpreted as ‘Prosperous Fate’ and ‘Prosperous Land’.

The biggest issue, and the one set out to be solved by this thesis, was the non-binary identity of Chih, and in particular their pronouns. I translated the text first using *die/hen/hun* pronouns. Before I became accustomed to the pronouns, I used a ‘cheat sheet’ to help assign which pronoun should be used for each function. At times, it was not completely clear to whom the ‘they’ in the source text referred, e.g., “they found a storage room nearby” (p. 19). In this instance, they could be singular referring to Chih alone, as the following phrase only mentions Chih, or it could be plural in reference to both Chih and Almost Brilliant as both of them went to sleep there. I translated this as singular, *die*.

Cheatsheet voornaamwoorden

Ik/mij/mijn: Ik heb gestemd/ Geef mij een stem/ Het is mijn stem

Hij/hem/zijn: Hij heeft gestemd/ Geef hem een stem/ Het is zijn stem

Zij/haar/haar: Zij heeft gestemd/ Geef haar een stem/ Het is haar stem

Die/die/diens: Die heeft gestemd. / Geef die een stem. / Het is diens stem.

Hen/hen/hun: Hen heeft gestemd. / Geef hen een stem. / Het is hun stem.

Die/hen/hun: Die heeft gestemd. / Geef hen een stem. / Het is hun stem.

3^e pers mv: zij hebben gestemd/geef hun een stem/ het is hun stem

Persoonlijk voornaamwoord (onderwerp)/persoonlijk voornaamwoord (niet-onderwerp)/bezittelijk voornaamwoord

Figure 1: My pronoun ‘cheat sheet’.

Translation: *De keizerin van Zout en Voorspoed*

Hoofdstuk een

‘Er is hier iets dat je wil opeten,’ riep Nagenoeg Briljant vanuit een boom vlakbij, ‘en ik zal er niet rouwig om zijn als dat gebeurt.’

Er rinkelden belletjes. Chih sprong overeind, keek snel even rond en tuurde naar het koord met de tingelende belletjes dat rond de kleine bivakplaats hing. Even was die terug in de abdij in de Zingende Heuvels, te laat voor de zoveelste ronde gebeden, huishoudelijke taken en lessen, maar in Zingende Heuvels rook het niet naar geesten en natte dennentakken. In Zingende Heuvels gingen de haartjes op Chihs armen niet waarschuwend overeind staan en klopte diens hart niet in diens keel.

De belletjes vielen stil.

‘Wat het ook is, het is al weg. Je kan naar beneden komen.’

De hop tjirpte een tweetonige roep die zowel argwanend als geërgerd klonk, maar ze streek op Chihs hoofd neer en schuifelde ongemakkelijk heen en weer. ‘De beschermingen moeten nog steeds werken. We zijn nu heel dicht bij het Scharlaken Meer.’

‘Nee, we zouden nooit zo ver zijn geraakt als ze nog zouden werken.’ Chih twijfelde even maar stapte toen in diens sandalen en dook onder het koord met belletjes door.

Waarschuwend fladderde Nagenoeg Briljant even op voor ze op Chihs schouder landde. ‘Geestelijke Chih, keer terug naar je bivak. Je verschrikkelijke onverantwoordelijkheid zal je dood worden en dan zal ik het de Verhevene mogen uitleggen.’

‘Maak er een sterk verhaal van,’ antwoorde Chih afwezig. ‘Stil zijn nu, ik denk dat ik zie waar al die herrie vandaan kwam.’

De hop ritselde misnoegd met haar veren maar zette haar klauwtjes steviger in diens schouder. Chih deed zich wel stoer voor, maar het vederlichte gewicht van de neixin op diens schouder was een troost. Chih stak diens hand omhoog om zachtjes over haar kam te strelen voordat die door de dennen begon te lopen.

Die wist dat daar geen weg was. Eerder die dag had die door het dennenbosje gelopen en hoewel die de sporen van een weg kon zien door de verwilderde varens en de gevallen takken heen, kon er nog geen hondenkar doorheen gekomen zijn. Chih vermoedde dat de weg ooit het Scharlaken Meer met de koninklijke hoofdweg verbonden had, in de tijd voordat het meer van alle kaarten gewist werd en verborgen werd door een uiterst toegewijde en getalenteerde keizerlijke magiër.

Overdag was hier geen weg te zien, maar 's nachts was alles duidelijk anders. De weg liep zo breed als een pakschuit tussen de bomen door en aan beide kanten dwaalden er schimmen rond, de voormalige beschermgeesten van het Scharlaken Meer. Chih wist dat de geesten een paar maanden eerder alles wat leefde dat op hun pad kwam verscheurd en aangevallen zouden hebben, om daarna te huilen dat ze nog steeds zo veel honger hadden.

Op dit moment hadden ze echter enkel oog voor de draagstoel die vanuit het oosten de geestenweg afkwam, uit de richting van het Scharlaken Meer. Hij werd door zes gesluierde mannen gedragen. Hun voeten kwamen niet helemaal tot de grond. In het maanlicht kreeg alles een zilveren

gloed, maar Chih kon zien dat de draagstoel, zoals het hoorde, gehuld was in keizerlijk rood en goud, met de mammoet en de leeuw van het Rijk fraai gedetailleerd op de gordijnen geborduurd.

Er was slechts één vrouw ter wereld die de mammoet en de leeuw mocht dragen, en binnenkort zou ze gekroond worden tijdens haar eerste Drakenhof in de hoofdstad.

Nou ja, dacht Chih, die diens hand rond Nagenoeg Briljant krulde voor troost, slechts één levende vrouw.

Toen de draagstoel voorbijkwam, boog Chih even diep als de geesten rondom die en wenste uit alle macht dat wijlen de keizerin de gordijnen zou openen en haar gezicht zou tonen. Zou het de gerimpelde vrouw zijn, gehuld in zijden gewaden, van wie Chih als kind ooit een glimp had opgevangen in Houksen, of een veel jongere vrouw, de keizerin van Zout en Voorspoed, zoals ze voor het eerst naar Anh gekomen was, voor het einde van de eeuwige zomer en voor de mammoet de leeuw had vertrappeld?

Toen Chih zich oprichtte, waren de geesten, de weg en de keizerin verdwenen, enkel Chihs bonkende hart bleef achter. 'Heb je dat gezien?' vroeg die aan Nagenoeg Briljant, die eindelijk niet meer beefde.

'Ja,' antwoordde de hop. Haar normale schrille toon was getemperd. 'Dat was de moeite, nu ben ik toch niet voor niets doodsbang geweest dat je op een afschuwelijke manier zou sterven.'

Chih moest lachen en streek met een vinger over de kam van Nagenoeg Briljant. Die begon aan de korte wandeling terug naar diens bivak. 'Kom, we kunnen nog een paar uurtjes slapen voor we moeten inpakken en verderlopen.'

Na nog twee dagen lopen door de kale berkenbossen, kwamen ze tegen het vallen van de avond bij het smalle strand van het Scharlaken Meer aan. Het meer zelf was bijna perfect rond, het resultaat van de dood van een vallende ster, en verder op het strand zag Chih de groene dakpannen van het verblijf van de voormalige keizerin. Tot diens verbazing stond er een aangestoken lantaarn op de veranda, die over het water gebouwd was. 'Nu al plunderaars?'

Een oude vrouw liep gezwind het huis uit terwijl die keek. Toen ze bij de balustrade kwam, staarde ze naar het water en de indigoblaauwe hemel erboven, waar de sterren tevoorschijn kwamen. Chih begon zich net af te vragen wat die moest doen toen de oude vrouw die opmerkte. 'Kom erbij! Van hieraf zie je het meer beter!'

Nagenoeg Briljant hield haar gedachten voor zich, dus liep Chih voorzichtig over de rotsachtige oever van het meer. Net toen het laatste beetje zalmroze licht de hemel verliet, ging die de lage treden van de veranda op. De oude vrouw wenkte die om dichterbij te komen. 'Kom, je bent net op tijd!'

Ze liet zien dat Chih zelf een sesamkoekje moest nemen van het schaalpje dat op de balustrade stond, maar ze leek afgeleid. Ze keek over het zwarte water uit met een koekje in haar hand. Even later dempte ze het licht van de lamp tot er slechts een zwakke gloed van afkwam.

'Grootmoeder, ik ben hier om...'

'Sst, meisje, het begint.'

Boven hen werd de hemel snel donker. Rondom hen waren de duistere berkenbossen, en voor hen uitgestrekt lag het Scharlaken Meer, als een spiegel die enkel de nacht reflecteerde. Eerst dacht Chih dat het diens verbeelding was, niet meer dan de luchtspiegeling die je zag nadat je ergens te

lang naar gestaard had, maar toen realiseerde die dat het echt was. Er kwam een lichte gloed van het water zelf af, iets wat leek op het laatste schijnsel van een uitdovend haardvuur.

‘Wat ...’

‘Sst. Kijken. Gewoon kijken.’

Chih hield diens adem in terwijl de zachte rode gloed helderder werd en zich over het hele meer uitspreidde als de vonken van het nieuwjaarsvuurwerk. Het was een stralend licht, te fel om van zo dichtbij naar te kijken, en het vloeide over het water, zo ver dat die de afzonderlijke bomen op het strand kon zien, de zwarte silhouetten van de nachtvogels op het water en het gegroefde gezicht van de vrouw die naast die stond, dat gerimpeld was van plezier. ‘Ik had al gehoopt dat het vanavond zou gebeuren. Het is wel nog wat koud, maar in andere jaren kwam het zelfs nog eerder.’

Chih stond naast de vrouw en samen staarden ze naar het vuurwerkspektakel voor hen. Niet lang nadat de rode lichtjes hun volle helderheid bereikt hadden, begonnen ze weer te vervagen. Chih telde in gedachten. Wanneer die de honderd haalde, lag er nog slechts een vage rode gloed over het water.

Toen de oude vrouw de lamp weer opdraaide, zuchtte ze gelukzalig. ‘Het is iedere keer weer zoals die eerste keer, en ik heb het in zestig jaar niet meer gezien. Kom binnen, het is nog te koud voor mijn broze botten.’

Chih was oud genoeg om te weten dat niemand ongevaarlijk was, maar nog steeds jong genoeg om onmiddellijk te gehoorzamen wanneer die de gezaghebbende toon van een oudere vrouw hoorde. Die volgde haar de woning in, waar ze meerdere papieren lampionnen aanstak. Er hing een vochtige koelte in het kleine kamertje waar ze zaten, maar het licht hielp een beetje. Ze zaten samen op de leren kussens rond de lege haard en de oude vrouw keek wat aandachtiger naar Chih, naar diens geschoren hoofd, diens koord met belletjes en diens indigoblauwe gewaden. ‘O, ik zie dat ik fout zat. Helemaal geen meisje, maar een geestelijke.’

Chih glimlachte. ‘De fout is snel gemaakt, grootmoeder, maar ja, ik ben geestelijke Chih van de abdij van de Zingende Heuvels. Deze gevederde lastpost is Nagenoeg Briljant.’

Nagenoeg Briljant kraste verontwaardigd bij die beschrijving en pronkte met haar goede manieren door voor hun gastvrouw neer te strijken en met haar smalle snavel tweemaal op de vloer voor zich te tikken. ‘Zeer vereerd om met u kennis te maken, matriarch.’

‘Insgelijks, vrouwe Nagenoeg Briljant. Als je geestelijke uit de Zingende Heuvels komt, ben jij een neixin, toch?’

Nagenoeg Briljant zette trots haar veren op. ‘Ja, matriarch. Ik ben een afstammeling van Immer Zegevierend en Altijd Beminnelijk. Ons geheugen gaat helemaal terug tot de Xun-dynastie.’

‘Wat een genoegen. Tijdens het bewind van Keizer Sung werd je soort bijna uitgeroeid. Ik had nooit verwacht nog een neixin te zien.’

‘De voliëre in de Zingende Heuvels is in vlammen opgegaan, maar de toenmalige Verhevene had drie broedende paartjes naar diens familie aan de andere oever van de Hu gestuurd, waaronder de overgrootouders van Bijna Fonkelend,’ verklaarde Chih. ‘Als u van de neixin gehoord hebt, grootmoeder, weet u vast wel dat ze voor alles een naam en een plaats willen weten.’

‘En ik kan me inbeelden dat dat ook voor jou geldt, nietwaar, geestelijke? Zeer goed. Mijn familienaam is Sun, maar iedereen noemt mij Konijn.’ Ze grijnsde en toonde twee tanden die inderdaad langer waren dan die eromheen.

‘Als kind werd ik er vaak mee geplaagd door de andere kinderen, maar ik ben inmiddels al heel oud, en ik heb nog nooit een tand verloren.’

Nagenoeg Briljant floot tevreden en Chih moest lachen.

‘Welkom bij uw plaats in de geschiedenis, grootmoeder. Woont u in de buurt? Ik had niet verwacht dat iemand me voor zou zijn bij het Scharlaken Meer toen de vrijmaking bekend gemaakt werd.’

‘Mijn familie baat een herberg langs de weg uit. Het is best gek. De mensen in de buurt denken dat deze plek vervloekt is door de rode schijn van het meer, maar ik heb het al altijd prachtig gevonden. Zoals een kampvuur en vuurwerk. Maar nu je hier bent, samen met Nagenoeg Briljant, ben ik blij dat de ware geschiedenis van het Scharlaken Meer verteld zal worden.’

Chih glimlachte bij het horen van Konijns woorden. Ze klonk een beetje als de vorige Verhevene, die diens volgelingen altijd had aangemoedigd om even vaak met de bloemisten en de bakkers te spreken als met de krijgsheren en de magistraten. Nauwkeurigheid boven alles. Je zult nooit het grote onthouden als je je het kleine niet herinnert.

‘Ik word volgende maand in de hoofdstad verwacht voor de eclips en het eerste drakenhof van de nieuwe keizerin, maar ik was in Kailin toen werd bekendgemaakt dat alle locaties zouden vrijkomen die door keizerin In-yo onder keizerlijke vergrendeling waren geplaatst. Ik was te dicht bij het Scharlaken Meer om de verleiding te weerstaan.’

Konijn lachte vriendelijk.

‘De verleiding om de eerste te zijn die de geheimen van het Voorspoedige Lot zou onthullen? Nietwaar, geleerde Chih?’

‘Ik zal niet ontkennen dat mijn ambitie een rol gespeeld heeft, maar ik heb de naam het Voorspoedige Lot nog nooit eerder gehoord, grootmoeder.’

‘Dat zal wel niet. Zo doopten de dienstmeisjes van keizerin In-yo deze plek toen ze hier voor het eerst kwamen vanuit de hoofdstad. Het was een grapje, begrijp je. Ze kwamen allen van het hof en het was best een bittere pil voor hen om met een barbaarse keizerin de wildernis in gestuurd te worden.’

Chih zat heel stil en naast die keek Nagenoeg Briljant aandachtig op. ‘Het is alsof u van hen gehoord heeft, grootmoeder.’

Konijn gnuifde. ‘Natuurlijk heb ik van hen gehoord. Ik kwam hier samen met hen heen, en ik was degene die zei dat ze mijn vader moesten inhuren om elke week met proviand van de hoofdweg te komen. Ze gaven hem nooit een fooi, of misschien dachten ze dat hun wereldse schoonheid een fooi was. Bah!’

‘Ik zou u dankbaar zijn, grootmoeder, voor elk verhaal dat u me kunt vertellen over het verblijf van de keizerin hier aan het Scharlaken Meer. Ik heb geen geld, maar ik wil mijn eten graag delen en als u klusjes heeft...’

‘Nee, geestelijke, spaar je eten en je arbeid. Dit huis is al heel oud en je zal werk genoeg hebben als je op tijd in de hoofdstad wilt zijn voor de eclips. Maar nu ben ik moe en moet ik naar bed.’

Ze blies alle lantaarns uit, op twee na, en nam er één die ze gemakkelijk in haar hand kon dragen. 'Je kan de andere nemen en iedere kamer kiezen die je maar wilt. Ik sta altijd vroeg op en het zal me genoeg doen om je te helpen met je werk.'

Ze trippelde verder het donkere huis in en Chih en Nagenoeg Briljant luisterden naar het wegsterven van haar stille voetstappen. 'Als er geen uilen in de dennen zaten, zou ik naar buiten gaan. Ik vind het dak hierboven maar niets,' zei Nagenoeg Briljant ontevreden.

'En ik vind de rest maar niets, maar we zijn hier tenminste welkom.'

Nadat die wat rondgekeken had, vond die een voorraadkamer die zo klein was dat Chih zich op de grond kon uitstrekken en de muren rondom die kon aanraken. Die spreidde diens slaapmat uit op de gladhouten vloer en hing toen voorzichtig en met zorg diens koord met belletjes voor de gesloten deur.

In de hanenbalken boven die maakte Nagenoeg Briljant een nest dicht bij de dakrand. Ze keek toe, maar zei niets. Toen Chih eindelijk indommelde met een plooi van diens gewaad rond diens lichaam gewikkeld tegen de frisheid van de lentenacht, droomde die niet van geesten en demonen, maar van zonlicht op helder water en een konijn dat rondneusde in de kaptafel van een edelvrouw.

Hoofdstuk twee

Gewaad. Zijde, zijdedraad, robijnen kraal. Donkergroene bladeren, geborduurd op een groene achtergrond. Op de rechtermouw rust een enkele rode robijnen kever op een groen blad.

Nachtjapon. Zijde, mousseline en zijdedraad. Moerbeimousseline omboord met witte zijde, de archaische karakters voor 'Rustgevende Slaap' staan in kraag geborduurd.

Tuniek. Wit bont, zwart bont, suède en ivoor. Zwart-wit gestreept bont rond de mouwen. In het bont is een golfpatroon geschoren. De binnenkant is gevoerd met suède en de hals sluit met een stukje ivoor.

'Dat is een tand.'

Chih en Nagenoeg Briljant keken op toen Konijn binnenkwam met een dienblad waarop vier kleine kommetjes stonden. Eentje was gevuld met vetrestjes voor Nagenoeg Briljant, die vanaf de dakspanten naar beneden fladderde om er genietend van te pikken.

'Een tand?' vroeg Chih terwijl die het ivoor voorzichtig aanraakte. Hij voelde glad onder diens vingers en er stonden kronkelende spiralen in gegraveerd, die van dichtbij pijn deden aan diens ogen. De hele zeehondenbonten tuniek was vakkundig gemaakt, maar hij woog al snel even veel als vier van de andere zijden gewaden waarmee hij in de cederhouten kist opgeborgen had gezeten.

'Ja. Kom wat fijngestampte rijst eten en ik zal je vertellen wat de keizerin tegen mij gezegd heeft.'

Chih ging voor Konijn zitten, het dienblad stond tussen hen in. Die was niet minder op diens hoede dan de vorige nacht, maar in het daglicht leek Konijn op de lekenzusters die voortdurend de abdij in- en uit liepen, ze waren er even vanzelfsprekend als de standbeelden van de hoppen aan de muren of de geur van houtpulp dat tot papier gemalen wordt.

De rijst was nog warm en op smaak gemaakt met berkensap. Ze aten even in elkaars gezelschap, met gekrulde vingers schepten ze de rijst op en wasten ze dan schoon in het kommetje met water.

Konijn spoelde haar kommetje netjes uit voor ze het aan de kant zette en ze glimlachte naar de jurk van zeehondenbont alsof het een oude kennis was die ze net op de markt had gezien.

Ik veronderstel dat je ondertussen al geraden hebt dat ik me wel thuis voel in dit oude huis. Mijn familie is wel uit deze regio afkomstig, maar toen ik vijf was, stuurde de provincie me met honderd san berkensap, dertig geitenlammeren en vijftig kisten oranje verf naar de hoofdstad. Het hadden eigenlijk vijfenvijftig kisten moeten zijn en ze hoopten dat de belastinginners vergevingsgezind zouden zijn als ze mij meestuurden in de plaats.

Blijkbaar waren ze dat en ik bracht de volgende vier jaar door met de vloeren van het Paleis van het Glorende Licht schrobben, zonder op te kijken. Ik leerde het paleis kennen langs de plinten, door het hout van de vloeren, de geur van de papieren kamerschermen en de dansende vlam van de olielamp die hele nacht lang bleef branden, zodat het nooit donker werd rond Zijne Goddelijkste Aanwezigheid de keizer van Den en Staal, keizer Sung.

Ik was dan wel een dorpsmeisje met konijntanden, maar ik was zo'n harde werkster dat ik op mijn tiende al gepromoveerd werd tot schoonmaakster in de vrouwenverblijven. Ik was zo trots toen ik de sluier kreeg die aangaf dat ik een dienstmeid in het binnenhuis was. Als ik toen had kunnen schrijven, zou ik mijn vader en mijn moeder verteld hebben over hoe hun dochter, gesluierd en gekleed in het typische groen van de hofhouding, samen met tweehonderd anderen langs de Paulwoniagalerij opgesteld stond om de nieuwe keizerin uit het noorden te groeten.

De hofmeesters hadden ons al voor zonsopgang opgesteld. Zo gespannen als katten slopen ze langs de rijen en haalden ze naar ons uit met hun paardenharen zweep wanneer we gaapten of als onze houding verslaptte. Meer dan één meisje viel flauw, maar ik was een kranige meid en stond stokstijf tot na de middag, toen er op de binnenplaats veel rumoer te horen was. We wisten dat de keizerin aangekomen was door de brullende bewakers en de klapperende vaandels.

Bij haar aankomst was er geen bataljon mammoeten om de muren van het Paleis van het Glorende Licht neer te halen, zoals wijlen haar moeder ooit had bedreigd. Nee, ze had slechts een enkele erewacht bij, die uit het binnenhuis geweerd werd, en zo liep ze helemaal alleen door de lange gang naar het hof van de keizer.

Ze hadden ons berispt en geslagen en we waren gewaarschuwd dat we gedegradeerd zouden worden tot het poetsen van de afvalputten in de keukens als we een blik wierpen op de toekomstige moeder van de keizer. Ik kon de verleiding toch niet weerstaan en sloeg mijn ogen op toen ze voorbij me liep.

In de geschiedenisboeken zal geschreven staan dat ze een lelijke vrouw was, maar dat klopte niet. Ze had de schoonheid van een vreemdeling, zoals een taal die we niet kunnen lezen. Ze was amper groter dan ik was op mijn tiende en ze had de bouw van een ossendrijvers dochter. Haar twee lange, inktzwarte vlechten hingen over haar schouders en haar gezicht was zo plat als een schotel en bijna helemaal rond. Waar ze vandaan komt noemen ze het een parelgezicht, maar hier vinden ze het maar een varkenssnuit.

Ze liep met haar rug zo recht als een van deze berken hier en ze droeg deze jurk, die nu nog even wit is als toen.

De zeehond waarvan deze jurk gemaakt is werd door haar broer op zijn eerste jacht gedood. Even geduldig als het eindeloze ijs had hij dagenlang gewacht bij de gaten waar ze adem komen halen en toen het beest uit het water oprees, was het even groot als een man. De sluiting is een van de tanden, gegraveerd door haar oom. Haar broer en haar oom, wier namen nu enkel nog uitgesproken worden in de rouwhallen van Ingrusk, waren een jaar daarvoor omgekomen bij de slag om de Wadden van Ko-anam.

Ze zou een fortuin aan zout geven, hopen parels en genoeg walvisolie om het paleis meer dan twintig jaar mee te verlichten, een van de rijkste bruidsschatten ooit geschonken aan een Anh-keizer, maar dat was nog een weekreis van het paleis ver. Toen ze voor het eerst een voet zette in het Paleis van het Glorende Licht, kwam In-yo alleen en met lege handen, met een prachtige jurk aan van zeehondenbont die de dames in de vrouwenverblijven slechts vreemd en barbaars konden noemen.

Ze droeg deze jurk nooit meer in het paleis, maar toen de keizer haar had verbannen, vroeg ze me om hem voorzichtig in te pakken. Ik was toen dertien en het was mijn taak om ervoor te zorgen. Ik verpakte de jurk heel voorzichtig tussen vele lagen knisperend papier en iedere tien dagen borstelde ik mogelijke motteneitjes of -larven weg.

Hoewel zeehondenbont in de hoofdstad als mode heerste toen In-yo regerend keizerin werd, kwam er nooit meer een jurk zoals deze. Dat kon ook niet. Hij is prachtig, maar elke steek is een pijnlijke herinnering aan haar geschiedenis, de doden die ze achter liet en het land waar ze niet meer naar kon terugkeren.

Begrijp je?

‘Ik weet niet zeker of ik het begrijp, grootmoeder, maar ik luister en Nagenoeg Briljant zal het onthouden.’

Konijn verstrakte even, alsof ze haar zelfbeheersing had verloren. Even leek het alsof ze iets anders was dan een eenvoudige dienstmeid, maar het was zo snel weer weg dat Chih niet kon zeggen wat het geweest was.

‘Dat is je roeping, is het niet? Onthouden en vastleggen.’

‘Klopt. Sommige dingen begrijpen we niet tot er jaren voorbij zijn. Soms duurt het generaties. We moeten leren om daar tevreden mee te zijn.’

Konijn hield haar hoofd schuin en keek aandachtig naar Chih. ‘Ben je dat? Tevreden daarmee, bedoel ik?’

‘Na mijn noviciaat werd ik naar het koninkrijk Sen gestuurd, waar Nagenoeg Briljant en ik het zomerse waterfestival moesten registreren. We waren daar enkel om de bevolkingsaantallen, de dansfeesten, het vuurwerk en dergelijke op te nemen, maar op de negende dag van het festival zwom er een bruine karper door de laatste dam van de stad en veranderde hij in een bonte draak. Hij kronkelde boven de stad en bracht een maand van heilige regen voort en daarna verdween hij weer. Grootmoeder, ik ben heel erg tevreden.’

Konijn glimlachte toen ze opstond om de schaaltes weg te ruimen en om Nagenoeg Briljant zachtjes over haar kuif te aaien. ‘Mooi.’

Die nacht droomde Chih over een man in een verblindend wit veld, die met het geduld van de verdoemden aan het wachten was bij een ademgat tot er een zeehond naar boven kwam. In diens droom hoorde de man iemand roepen en draaide zich om, en met een glimlach op zijn ronde gezicht liep hij weg, zijn speer vergeten.

Hoofdstuk drie

Beker. Gepolijst mahoniehout ingelegd met zilver. Een zilveren spin is ingelegd in de bodem van de beker.

Vijf zeszijdige dobbelstenen. Bot en goud. Op de zijden staan de maan, een vrouw, een vis, een kat, een schip en een naald in zilver gegraveerd.

Spelbord. Bleek hout en gouden verf. In zes cirkels zijn de maan, een vrouw, een vis, een kat, een schip en een naald getekend.

Chih glimlachte zachtjes toen die het spel zag dat die van onder het slaapplatform had gehaald, het had verstopt gezeten tussen het stoffige extra beddengoed en een zestal paar identieke muiltjes. Die liet de dobbelstenen in de beker vallen en schudde ermee zodat ze hol kletterden.

Konijn keek op van waar ze gele lappen zijde uit een bergplaats onder de vloer aan het trekken was, het waren vaandels die ontworpen waren om te tonen wanneer de keizer aanwezig was. Voor zover Chih wist, was er nooit een keizer in het Voorspoedige Lot geweest.

‘Speel je soms?’

‘Wie in het keizerrijk niet? Op mijn vijfde Nieuwjaar stopte mijn moeder de dobbelstenen in mijn handen. We hadden maar een papieren bord en de dobbelstenen waren slechts van steen, maar het was hetzelfde.’

‘Ik vroeg me eerder af of het niet verboden was door je geloftes, maar alsjeblieft.’

Konijn ging tegenover Chih op haar knieën zitten en gaf die een handjevol kiezeltjes. ‘Doe maar.’

Chih plaatste na een tijdje al diens kiezeltjes op de vrouwe, die elegant en glimlachend de typische klederdracht van de verdoemde Ku Dynastie droeg. Konijn stroopte haar mouwen op en toonde zo een magere arm vol littekens. Ze schudde de beker op en neer voor ze de dobbelstenen eruit liet tuimelen en net als een beroepsdeler ‘dah!’ riep tijdens het uitademen.

De dobbelstenen rolden over het bord en gaven vis, schip en maan aan.

‘Oh, wat jammer,’ zei Konijn toen ze de kiezeltjes naar zich toe veegde, ‘Je mag nooit al je geld op één ding inzetten.’

‘Ik speel het graag op mijn manier,’ antwoordde Chih nonchalant. ‘Speelde de keizerin ook zo?’

‘De keizerin... tja. Ze zag het spel voor het eerst toen ze al bijna een maand in de vrouwenverblijven woonde.’

De nieuwe keizerin was net een spook. In het begin was iedereen bang van haar omdat vrouwen uit het noorden gezien werden als heksen en tovenaressen. Maar toen ontdekten ze haar grote geheim, dat ze slechts een eenzaam meisje was met een gebroken hart en werd ze onbenullig.

Toentertijd woonden er een dertigtal accessoirevrouwen in de vrouwenverblijven, maar de belangrijkste was Kaofan, de dochter van de Kang-stam uit het oosten. Tot ze naar het zuiden

verbannen werd om bij de grafzerksnijders en de steenkoolbranders te wonen, was ze meer keizerin dan de keizerin zelf en ze hield ervan om Maan Vrouwe Schip te spelen.

Op een dag waren ze aan het spelen, net zoals wij nu, in de Chrysanten Kamer, waar alle papieren kamerschermen bekleed zijn met bleke oranje chrysantenblaadjes van filigraan en Kaofan zat er zoals de delers uit de water- en bloemenregio, met een van haar schouders ontbloot.

Ik zat er ook, ik was een gewaad dat langs de mouw gescheurd was aan het verstellen en dus merkte ik de keizerin een paar seconden eerder op dan Kaofan deed.

Ze stond in de deuropening, met haar hoofd wat schuin en haar handen slap langs haar zij. Haar haren waren geborsteld en gevlochten nadat de keizer had gebruld dat hij er genoeg van had om het in de knoop te zien en ze had grote donkere kringen onder haar ogen. 'Wat speelt u?'

Ik weet niet zeker of iemand van ons haar al had horen spreken. Haar stem was zacht en diep en het geluid klonk alsof het van ver kwam. Even was ik bang dat Kaofan bars tegen haar zou doen, zoals ze vaak deed tegen de lager geplaatste vrouwen, maar ze glimlachte. 'Kom erbij zitten, ik zal het tonen.'

Met overdreven beleefdheid legde ze het spel uit aan de nieuwe keizerin, terwijl ze af en toe geniepig keek naar haar hechtste vriendinnen. Ze toonde haar hoe de figuren leken op de tekeningen op de dobbelsteen en hoe ze haar inzet op iedere figuur moest plaatsen.

'Waar spelen we voor?'

'Oh, we spelen voor juwelen knopen, maar als u geen inzet heeft...'

Met haar gezicht zo bewegingsloos als een poel, nam de keizerin zwijgend gitten knopen bezet met jade uit haar zak. Ze waren duidelijk van keizerlijke makelij en we werden eraan herinnerd dat zij, wat ze er ook mee wou doen, nog steeds de keizerin was.

Hoef ik je te vertellen dat ze won? Het is niet echt een spel waar je veel ervaring voor nodig hebt. Daarom leren we het aan kleine kinderen op Nieuwjaar, om hen een voorproefje van winnen te geven, en om oude gokkers eraan te herinneren dat ook zij uiteindelijk zullen sterven. Ze won en bleef winnen, uiteindelijk lag er een bergje knopen voor haar en had Kaofan lege handen.

'Ik zal u ze allemaal teruggeven,' zei ze na even te mijmeren, 'als u me vertelt waar u dit bord vandaan heeft.'

Kaofan glimlachte en In-yo liet het fortuin in haar handen vallen alsof het niets meer waard was dan kiezels die ze van straat had geraapt.

'Soms komt er een vrouw met spelletjes. Ze reist de kust af en brengt ons dan tijdverdrijf, spellen en onze lotsvoorspelling. Zou u een ander spel willen zien dat ze ons gegeven heeft?'

In-yo keek haar aan en wanneer ik er nu op terugkijk, weet ik nog steeds niet wat ze zag toen ze naar de mooiste van de keizers vrouwen keek. Ik vraag me af of ze het einde van Kaofans leven zag, hoe haar lichaam bedekt zou zijn met vuil en as, of dat ze de minachting zag die Kaofan voor haar voelde, en ja, ook toen al, wat van de angst.

Toch weet ik heel goed dat In-yo Kaofan nooit heeft gehaat. Ze kan medelijden met haar hebben gehad, of boos op haar zijn geweest, of haar simpelweg vervelend, idioot of niet-modieus gevonden hebben. Haat, daarentegen, is voorbehouden voor gelijken en voor zover het In-yo aanging, had ze in het hele keizerrijk geen gelijken.

Begrijp je?

Chih dacht even na voor die diens hoofd schudde. 'Ik denk dat ik er ietsje dichterbij gekomen ben, grootmoeder, maar neen. Ik begrijp het niet. Nog niet.'

Konijn glimlachte haar sterke, scherpe tanden bloot. 'Je bent wel snugger, hè?'

'Dat vonden de geestelijken ook altijd, grootmoeder.'

'Goed. Dat is iets goeds.'

Ze ging verder met de gele zijde uit de compartimenten van onder de vloer af te winden en zei de rest van de dag niets meer.

Hoofdstuk vier

Zak met lychee vruchten. Linnen, inkt en lychee. Gemerkt met een gewicht van 10 tan en de regionale stempel voor de Ue provincie.

Zak met hazelnoten. Linnen, inkt en hazelnoten. Gemerkt met een gewicht van 10 tan en de regionale stempel van Tsu.

Mammoet ter grootte van een pruim. Goud, robijn, email en ijzer. De mammoet is eerder realistisch dan abstract gemaakt, gedetailleerde haartjes in de vacht en robijnen als ogen. De mammoet is opgetuigd met blauw email en de slagstanden zijn bedekt met ijzer.

De betovering die de hele regio rond het Scharlaken Meer voor vijftig jaar had afgesloten, had de etenswaren in de provisiekast van het Voorspoedige Lot vers gehouden. Terwijl die de gouden mammoet in diens hand bestudeerde, griste Chih een paar lychees uit de zak. Toen die in de flinterdunne schil beet, vloeide het belachelijk zoete sap diens mond in. De smaak was tegenwoordig heel zeldzaam, nu de Ue provincie zich soeverein had verklaard en haar grenzen had gesloten.

'Jouw smaakpapillen kunnen die verfijnde smaak niet voldoende appreciëren,' snoof Nagenoeg Briljant, maar ze vloog niet weg toen Chih twee van de vruchten pelde en naast haar op de grond legde. Terwijl de hop at, ging Chih naar Konijn, die een kopje kruidenthee aan het zetten was.

'Oh gut, dat heb ik in jaren niet gezien. We waanden het kwijt.'

Ze had een vertederde trek rond haar mond terwijl ze de mammoet in haar handen bekeek. Het dier was het symbool van het noordelijke volk, net zoals de leeuw voor het Anh keizerrijk was. Heel diens leven, had Chih de mammoet en de leeuw samen gezien. Het paar keek met een soort achterdochtig geduld uit vanaf de gravuren en de blazoenen. Ze hadden keizerrijken zien ontstaan en zien ondergaan, leken ze te zeggen, en ze zouden dit hetzelfde zien doen.

Konijn draaide de mammoet ondersteboven om Chih te tonen wat die niet had opgemerkt, een zegel van de maker gestampt op een ronde voet. Chih kneep diens ogen tot spleetjes om het te lezen, zich maar half bewust dat Nagenoeg Briljant de kamer in fladderde en zich in de dakspanten nestelde. 'De karakters voor... *elegante vrouw* en... *civetkat*?'

'Ja. Het is de beroepstijp van Yan Lian, de grote kunstenares. Ze is als non ingetrokken in de Phan Kwai-abdij, maar ze was ooit heel geliefd in de hoofdstad.'

De vrouwenverblijven waren gestoffeerd met vruchtbaar zwart en gelukbrengend rood. De hofsgeneesheer had bevestigd dat de keizerin in verwachting was van een kind. De dames van het hof vroegen zich af hoe In-yo dat wist, met hoe gedrongen en rond ze was, maar ze waren voorzichtiger rond haar. Wie een kind draagt, heeft de sleutels tot leven en dood en hun verwensingen moeten gevreesd worden.

Na de aankondiging werd de keizerin geobsedeerd door waarzeggerij om haar lot en voorspoed te voorspellen. Ze liet waarzeggers ontbieden uit de stad, van bij de grenzen, uit het verre Ning en uit het krijgshaftige Zhu. Ze onthaalde mannen die met stenen gooiden, vrouwen die kaarten lazen, en zelfs een persoon die geen van beide was met een paard dat een getal kon stampen dat verwees naar het grote heilige boek van de gesluisde volkeren uit het zuiden.

Ik was net terug van een mysticus uit het westen naar de poorten te begeleiden toen een boodschapper vlak voor me aankwam. 'De Keizer van Den en Staal wilt u eren voor het huizen van de toekomstige prins.'

Hij bood haar een pakje aan verpakt in zijde en ze zuchtte toen ze de inhoud zag. Het was een gouden plaatje, zacht genoeg om er met een vingernagel in te krassen en zwaar genoeg om tegen haar borst te bonzen als ze het aan de gouden ketting droeg waarmee het gekomen was.

Ik zag een vleugje afkeer over haar gezicht glijden, zelfs toen ze de keizer via de boodschapper bedankte. Ik draaide me om ook te vertrekken, maar ze hield me tegen. 'Eerlijk, zou jij dit dragen?'

Ik mompelde de gewoonlijke excuses, dat ik als dief gebrand zou worden en geëxecuteerd zou worden als zoiets ooit rond mijn vuile nek ging, maar ze schudde haar hoofd. 'Vertel me de waarheid.'

'Neen, ik houd niet van ketenen rond mijn nek.'

'Ik ook niet. Nu vertel me, meisje, wie is de beste kunstenaar die je kent.'

Ik kon iemand als Chang Hai genoemd hebben, iemand uit de groep kunstenaars die aan het hof heel bekend waren voor hun bloemen of hun nauwgezet gebeeldhouwde perziken. In plaats daarvan was ik zo verrast dat ik haar de waarheid vertelde.

Toen ze op de keizerlijke ontbieding inging, leek Yan Lian mij zo groot als een boom en zo wild als het everzwijn dat ronddwaalde in de bossen rond de hoofdstad. Ze had een kort kapsel zoals een non, maar ze had er opvallende patronen in geschoren, zoals er in fluweel waren, en haar ogen waren net zo smal als haar glimlach breed was. Ze droeg toen mannenkledij en ze flaneerde de vrouwenverblijven in alsof ze de wereld om haar duim kon draaien.

Yan Lian woog de gouden plaat in haar hand en ze liet de ketting door haar vingers glijden alsof hij van water gemaakt was. Ze knikte toen ze erin kon krassen met haar vingernagel en draaide zich terug naar de keizerin. 'Ik kan met dit goud iets prachtigs maken voor u, maar keizerin, u moet weten dat niets *gratis* is.'

De wilde kunstenaar legde een eigenaardige nadruk op het woord gratis. Ik kon het toen niet weten, en de keizerin wist het zeker niet, maar Yan Lian gebruikte het accent van de water- en bloemenregio, waar elk sensueel genot een prijs afdwingt en er niets *gênanter* is dan een kus gratis krijgen, alsof het een daad van barmhartigheid was.

De keizerin mag dan wel niet geweten hebben waar Yan Lian op doelde, maar ze had iets gehoord in de stem van de andere vrouw en glimlachte. 'Kom bij me in mijn vertrekken zitten. We hebben heel wat ideeën te bespreken. Jij, meisje. Hoe heet je?'

'Konijn, nobele keizerin.'

'Goed, kom hier, Konijn, en zit voor de deur van mijn vertrekken. Blijf daar en hou mogelijke luistervinken ver weg. Ik zou niet willen dat mijn ideeën gestolen worden.'

Ik vermoed dat ze wel even over het ontwerp gesproken hebben. De kleine gouden mammoet is in ieder geval net zo opgetuigd voor oorlog als de keizerlijke mammoeten zijn. Ik herinner me wel geen ontwerpen. Ik herinner gelach en gezang, misschien wat gehuil, of mogelijk was dat slechts gekreun dat doorheen de nacht steeds wanhopiger werd. Ik herinner me een verontwaardigd pijnkreetje dat overging in gegiechel en het glijden van huid op zijde en huid op hout. Enkele van mijn vrienden uit de keuken smokkelden me wat rijst en ingelegde augurken toe en renden daarna snel weg. Dankbaar at ik, maar ik proefde het eten amper, in plaats daarvan was ik gefocust aan het luisteren naar het werk van de keizerin en de kunstenares.

Toen het ochtendgloren aanbrak en ik op mijn post begon in te dommelen, gleed de deur open. Het was ongepast van me, maar ik gluurde de vertrekken van de keizerin in en zag haar uitgestrekt op haar rug liggen, half bedekt met een bevuilt gewaad, haar donkere haren lagen als een inktvlek rond haar hoofd. Ze was zachtjes aan het snurken, maar het geluid klonk voldaan en Yan Lian schudde haar hoofd. Op haar schouder zat er een helderrode plek waar ze afwezig over streek voor ze haar gewaad optrok en haar bedekte. 'Ik heb magistraten en bandieten gehad, courtisanes en operazangers, maar meisje met de konijntanden, ik heb nog nooit iemand zoals haar gehad.'

Misschien zei ze dat over alle mannen en vrouwen waarmee ze naar bed ging, maar ik vond dat er oprechte verwondering in haar stem zat.

Later, toen ik het badwater en parfum bracht voor In-yo's toilet, zei ze dat ik moest blijven terwijl ze zich waste. Ik keek toe hoe ze haar sterke ledematen afspoelde, haar donkere huid glinsterde van de waterdruppeltjes. Ze was even veel een nette Ahn dame als een wolf een schoothondje is en toen ik zag dat ze vanuit haar ooghoeken naar me keek, zat ik plots heel recht. 'Ik heb je die eerste dag gezien, niet? Jij keek op toen ik langsliep.'

Ik knikte en zei dan verlegen, 'ik had niet gezien dat u het gemerkt had, Uwe Majesteit.'

Ze lachte breed naar me en haar neus krulde een beetje bij het gebaar. 'In het noorden worden we van jongs af aan geleerd om uit onze ooghoeken te kijken. Zo is er minder beweging om de dingen waarop we jagen af te schrikken of om de aandacht te trekken van wie op ons jaagt. Wat zag je toen je naar me keek?'

Ik dacht diep na over mijn antwoord terwijl ik haar droog wreef en de mantel van haar zwarte haren over een wollen doek spreidde. 'Ik dacht dat u er, in mijn ogen, heel vreemd uitzag,' zei ik uiteindelijk. 'En heel alleen.'

'Ik ben ook alleen,' antwoorde ze terwijl ze zelf haar gewaad dichtbond. 'Maar misschien ben ik minder alleen dan ik had gedacht, hm, Konijn?'

Ik bloosde en boog mijn hoofd, en ik mompelde iets over plicht en vereerd zijn om te dienen, maar diep vanbinnen dacht ik dat ze nooit meer alleen zou zijn, niet als ik er wat aan kon doen. Dicht bij haar zijn was zoals verwarmd worden door een haardvuur en ik had het lange tijd koud gehad.

Welke afspraak ze ook gemaakt hadden, twee weken later keerde een kleine gouden mammoet terug naar het paleis, verpakt in een twist van gewone katoen. In-yo keek ernaar en glimlachte, en ik zweer dat ik nog nooit iets mooiers had gezien.

Chih keek vragend. 'Gaat u me vragen of ik het begrijp? Ik ben nog niet zeker of ik dat wel doe.'

'Wel, bij iets zoals dit, begrijp je het of begrijp je het nooit.'

Hoofdstuk vijf

Gebroken bezem met tinnen bedeltjes rond de steel gebonden.

Gebroken poederdoos. Albast, vet en karmijn.

Berkenschors en rol. Berkenschors, zwarte veer, haarlok en blauwe zijdedraad. De haarlok en de veer zijn in de berkenschors gerold en alles wordt door de draad samengebonden.

Chih schrok op toen Konijn binnenkwam en de berkenschors en rol van die afpakte. Ze hield de rol vast alsof ze hem wou verbrijzelen. 'Ik zal je ook niet vragen of je dit begrijpt, want als je niet geboren en getogen werd in het Paleis van het Glorende Licht, kun je dat niet. Toentertijd kon je duizenden dingen zeggen via je inkt of papier, nog voor iemand een woord van je gedicht had gelezen.'

Chih keek naar het ding in Konijns handen en vroeg zich af waarom de haarlok en de donkere veer er plots zo onheilspellend uitzagen. 'Ik dacht dat het rommel was.'

'Het is rommel,' zei ze kortaf, 'maar dat is wat je bekijkt als je degenen die er niet meer zijn wilt begrijpen, is het niet? Hun afval. Wat ze achterlieten.'

Chih wachtte geduldig. Dat was wat het grootste deel van diens opleiding had ingehouden, leren een verhaal af te wachten, in plaats van erop te jagen en dan het zou wel snel genoeg volgen.

Konijn zuchtte.

Dit werd aan haar deur bezorgd nadat ze bevallen was van de keizerlijke prins, Kau-tan, ook wel bekend als de verbannen prins. Hij was van haar weggenomen tegen haar wil, om hem te wassen hadden ze gezegd, maar ze had gehuild van vermoeidheid omdat ze maar al te goed beseft had dat ze hem misschien nooit meer zou zien.

Ik had haar gewassen en nadat ze de kleine prins uit haar armen genomen hadden, kroop ik bij haar in bed. Ik hield haar in mijn armen en troostte haar zo goed als ik kon. Maar niets kan een moeder troosten wier kind zo ongewild uit haar armen ontnomen is en na die eerste rouwklacht, kwam er nooit een andere. Ze vroeg me om verhalen te vertellen over waar ik vandaan kwam, over mijn volk en ik zocht de krochten van mijn geheugen af om haar te vertellen over het leven in de herberg, over hoe mijn vader kilo's stoofschotel kookte voor de gasten en hoe mijn moeder tussen haar klusjes door voorspelde of er voorspoed lag in het leven van zowel de groten als de kleinen.

De dames van de vrouwenverblijven lieten ons alleen in het donker en zo lagen we bijna twee weken lang samen, huid tegen huid, terwijl ze genas en ik haar vertelde over mijn leven buiten het

paleis. Het deed er niet toe dat het zo nederig was, het belangrijkste was dat het zich buiten de paleispoorten afspeelde en dat was waar ze het meest nood aan had.

Dit kreeg ze uit de keizers eigen hand, het ziet er nog bijna helemaal hetzelfde uit als toen. Vreemd hoe sommige rommel blijft bestaan, maar hoe we kostbaarheden kwijtraken, niet?

Ik zat naast haar en toonde het, en toen ze zich afvroeg waarom haar echtgenoot haar rommel stuurde, legde ik het aan haar uit en wenste ik dat de hemel zou opensplijten en me zou opslokken.

De haarlok was van haar moeder. De lok was net zo lang als haar haren waren en sluik zwart doorschoten met zilver, het was haar net zo bekend als de geur van sneeuw die in de lucht hangt en de smaak van zeehondenvlees. Door het hier te zien, gewikkeld in berkenschors, wist de keizerin dat haar moeder dood was.

De jacanaveer was een symbool voor verbanning, haar verbanning. Ze mocht van geluk spreken dat het geen stuk wilgenschors was, wat dat zou executie betekend hebben.

De keizer had zijn erfgenaam uit het noorden. Hij had geen noordse echtgenote meer nodig.

Toen ik dit aan haar uitlegde, zweeg ze en draaide ze haar gezicht naar de muur, ze was zo kalm als de hemel vlak voor een blikseminslag.

Chih wachtte tot die zeker wist dat Konijn klaar was en knikte dan. 'Ik denk dat ik dit begrijp, grootmoeder.'

'Is dat zo, geestelijke van de Zingende Heuvels? Want ik ben niet zeker of ik het wel wil begrijpen.'

Konijn zweeg, ze beefde bijna door een emotie die lange tijd onderhuids gebleven was.

Ietswat nerveus legde Chih diens hand vriendelijk op de schouder van de vrouw. Die was lichtjes verrast om te ontdekken dat Konijn weldegelijk een persoon van vlees en bloed was en niet de koude, mistachtige vochtigheid had van een teruggekeerde ziel. 'Het is rommel en waar ik vandaan kom, verbranden we rommel.'

Konijn keek verrast en dan knikte ze. 'Ja. Dat doen wij hier ook.'

Die nacht krulde de rook van hun vuur naar de wijde hemel toe, zoals de wierrook van een offer uit de tempel. Wanneer die ging slapen, droomde Chih van een vrouw in een prachtige zeehondenbonten tuniek, haar zwarte lokken waren doorschoten met zilveren draden. Vanuit de ijspoorten van het noorden, keek ze naar het zuiden, zonder met haar ogen te knipperen, aan het wachten tot haar dochter terug naar huis zou keren.

Results and discussion

In this section, I present the results of the reader-response questionnaire. The order of these subsections is based on the presentation of the results in Vos and Nutters (2022). I have retained them here as they provided a clear structure. Having the same order of chapters also facilitates the comparison of the two studies which complement each other.

Demographic information

As mentioned, 100 respondents completed the questionnaire. The different versions of the translation were relatively equally split across the valid responses: 35 read the first fragment (F1) with the pronouns *die/hen/hun*, 33 the second (F2) using *die/die/diens* and 32 fragment three (F3) with *hen/hen/hun* as pronouns. In total, there were 38 male, 59 female, one non-binary and two ‘other’ respondents, who specified ‘furry’ and ‘boch 383 versie’ as gender. They are also counted as non-binary people. This distribution is similar among the different fragments (F1: 31% male – 69% female; F3: 31% male – 66% female – 3% non-binary). Fragment two is the only where there were more male than female respondents: 52% (17) compared to 42% female (14) and 6% non-binary (2).

As for age distribution, all eligible participants were either 16 (32%), 17 (62%) or 18 (6%) years old. Most respondents lived in the province of Antwerp, with half of the respondents of all fragments reporting residing there. Around 30% lived in Limburg, 16% in West-Flanders, with this province’s inhabitants making up 20% of the respondents of fragment 1. Unfortunately, there was only one respondent from East-Flanders and none from the province Flemish Brabant. No respondents reported living in the French speaking part of Belgium nor in Brussels. The dialects in these four provinces are part of three different dialectal groups (Flemish, Brabantic and Limburgish), which could be significant for the reception of the different non-binary pronouns. This will be discussed in further detail later. The majority of the respondents spoke Dutch as their native language (93%). Two reported being a native speaker of French, two of Arabic, one of Urdu and one of Russian. One respondent had both Dutch and French as mother tongue. Four of the multilingual respondents read fragment two.

The respondents were almost equally split among language-focused programmes and non-language-focused programmes, with 51% of respondents reporting to be in a programme with more than ten hours of language classes per week. Language-focused programmes included *Economie-Moderne Talen*, *Latijn-Wetenschappen* and *Grieks Wiskunde*. According to timetables found on school websites, all of these programmes schedule ten or more hours of different language classes per week, mostly Dutch, English, French, Latin, Greek, German or occasionally Spanish classes, depending on the specific programme and school. One respondent put ‘*hotelschool*’ (hotel and catering school) as their programme without specifying which exact programme they were enrolled in. This type of schools offers both language-focused and non-language-focused programmes, but a majority appeared to be non-language-focused. As such this respondent was classified as a non-language response. For both F1

and F2, the non-language programmes had a slight majority of one person. For F3 there were four more respondents who were enrolled in a language-focused programme.

As for the section regarding reading habits, the respondents could answer the question 'Do you like to read' with 'yes', 'no', or 'sometimes'. All three options had a relatively equal number of respondents (35% - 36% - 29% respectively). Most respondents (26) read once a trimester; this might be linked to the obligatory book report that most students have to hand in for Dutch class. This is supported by the reported reading language, 60% marked Dutch as their most common reading language. Only five respondents read daily, and they were all enrolled in language-focused programmes. Students reporting reading 'almost never' and 'never' were mostly following non-language-focused programmes (14 out of 20 and 7 of 13 respectively). The answers also show a link between frequency of reading and enjoyment. Out of the 36 participants who reported not enjoying reading, 28 of them read almost never to never. This is also true for the contrary, of the 35 people reporting enjoying reading, 32 read once a month or more. All respondents, except those who reported reading never, were asked in what language they read most often. The majority of respondents reported reading in Dutch, but 39% mostly read in English. One respondent commented that they read Arabic texts. The finding that almost two fifths of all respondents mostly read English books might impact the reading experience of the Dutch non-binary pronouns and will be looked at in further detail.

The last demographic question polled whether the respondents had been in contact with the LGBTQIA+ community. 55 people were either queer themselves (information they volunteered in the comments), or they had queer family or friends. Four respondents chose not to answer and one put down "*Estelle: wandelende tak*" (Estelle: stick-insect). Four respondents answered something that might be read as homophobic, these were '*nee gelukkig niet*' (no luckily not), '*nee zwak*' (no weak), '*Neen, fk hun*' (No, f[uc]k them), and '*neen, ik associeer mij niet met die rotzooi*' (no, I don't associate with that filth). These four respondents will also be looked at in further detail.

Narrative engagement

This section will investigate the results of the questions on narrative engagement, based on the questionnaire created by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009). First the overall results and the results of the three fragments will be discussed. Following this general discussion, interesting findings from the various demographic groups will be reviewed. The subgroupings are: language- and non-language-focused programmes in school, respondents reporting reading often (in all languages), respondents reporting reading mostly in English, the three provinces (Antwerp, Limburg, and West- and East-Flanders), and lastly respondents reporting knowing queer people.

Of all respondents, only 17% reported having no trouble with recognizing the thread of the story, 11% were neutral and 71% agreed or completely agreed with this statement. When checked against the content questions, readers indeed show having moderate comprehension. The total score of correct answers for all respondents was 61%. The sequence questions, of which the first asked to mark the

order of events as they occurred in the story (Q1_1) and the second to order Chih's emotions as they felt them during the story (Q3_1), scored 70% and 63% respectively. On three out of four questions regarding interpersonal relationships (Q2_1_3, Q2_1_4, Q2_1_5), less than half of the respondents answered correctly. In contrast, the first interpersonal question (Q2_1_2 Rabbit's family lives close to the Scarlet Lake) did yield 64 correct answers compared to 44 for the second and 41 for the third and fourth questions.

When looking at the fragments in more detail, F2 readers reported greater ease with following the storyline, 27% had no or absolutely no trouble. Readers of F3 had the most issues, only 9% reported not having a hard time with following the plot. However, when checked against the content questions, both scored 63%. F2 readers did better on the interpersonal questions, especially on the second (Q2_1_3. Almost Brilliant encourages Chih to go exploring) where 19 people (58%) answered correctly compared to 31% for F1 and 44% for F3. F1 readers scored the lowest on all interpersonal questions, with a difference of at least 10% on questions Q2_1_3, Q2_1_4, and Q2_1_5. In this text, the pronouns *die/hen/hun* were used. It might be that this mixing of a traditionally singular demonstrative pronoun with a traditionally plural personal pronoun and a plural possessive determiner was confusing for the readers. F3 scored only one point more on this question. Here the pronouns *hen/hun/hun* were used and the plural nature of these pronouns might have caused uncertainty towards who experienced which emotion at what times. F1 readers scored the highest on the emotion sequence question (Q3_1), leading with 71% correct answers, a 12% difference with the next best, F3. F2 readers scored the worst on both sequence questions, only scoring 64% and 58% respectively. The pronouns used in this fragment, the traditionally demonstrative *die/die/diens*, might offer the explanation for this phenomenon as it might be unclear to whom the pronouns refer. Question Q2_1_8, about Rabbit liking the lights on the Scarlet Lake was best understood by most of F3 readers, where 26 (81%) readers answered correctly, as opposed to the 66% and 67% of F1 and F2 readers respectively.

Only two respondents answered all content questions correctly. Two others had no correct answers to these questions. One of these respondents clarified that they found the text "confusing and not fun to read" which might explain the lack of correct answers. One other respondent with zero correct answers might have had no interest in participating as they put down "*boch 383 versie*" as gender and put the German articles "*der, die and das*" as answer when asked about other known non-binary pronouns. Several of their comments also appeared to be nonsense keyboard smashes. They answered the ending question asking for further comments or questions with "*ik heb super veel vragen*" (I have so many questions). One participant only answered the first content question and then did not answer any other questions until the questions polling narrative presence. It is unclear why she did so. When asked about other known non-binary pronouns, she also commented "*het*" (it). It might be that she was uncertain about her knowledge of the text and preferred to not answer the content questions.

Following every question, respondents could volunteer a comment about the question. In total, 88% of respondents commented on one or more questions after reading the fragment. In total, there were 265

comments, of which 166 had useable information. Comments that were not counted included answers as “no”, “/”, elaborations on the answers to the content questions such as “finally, she enters”, keyboard smashes, and general comments at the end of the questionnaire such as “good luck with your research Lisa”. Of those comments, 76 were left on question Q12 (“Do you know other personal pronouns to refer to non-binary people? If so, state which pronoun”). Here ‘no’ answers were counted. Readers of F3 left the most total comments, responsible for half of all comments written.

Several respondents reported having trouble with the Asian setting and fantasy genre of the text. They described the fragment as being *verwarrend* (confusing), *onduidelijk* (unclear) or *moeilijk* (difficult). Four respondents mentioned having trouble with the names, supposedly because they are quite different from what a Western audience is used to. Several comments also touched on the unfamiliarity of the story world, referencing a lack of connection to the “real world”. They described the story as ‘vague’ and found that they were lacking context. One respondent even questioned if the fragment was the start of the story, as it begins in the middle of an action. The narrative understanding section of the questionnaire reflects these issues: 80% of respondents who left comments calling the text vague reported having trouble following the thread of the story. The content questions, however, showed a slightly different picture as these participants scored slightly better overall. The two readers of F2 who reported finding the text vague and out of context scored worse on the content questions, while the six F1 readers scored higher on eight out of ten content questions. F3 readers did marginally better, with an average of 2.4% more on each content question. Overall, readers show having trouble with understanding the text. As shown from the comments, the Asian setting and fantasy genre of the text might have played an important role in this.

The results regarding narrative presence show little transportation into the story world. This might also be linked to the genre and setting, as one respondent commented: “it was a weird story where there was no connection with the real world.” Only 18% reported feeling like their mind was in the story world. Here F1 readers were the least transported, only 9% responded positively. 63% of F3 readers documented no transportation, compared to 51% of F2 readers and 54% of F1 readers. Regarding loss of story world when the story ended, F1 readers were the least affected, with only 35% experiencing this phenomenon. For F2 and F3 were 57% and 60% respectively affected by losing the story world. The last question of the section on narrative presence investigated the perceived closeness of the story world. F1 readers scored the lowest once again, 83% did not agree with perceiving the story world as closer, although F3 had the least respondents agreeing with the statement, only 6% did so. 50% of F3 readers also completely disagreed, with the remaining 28% disagreeing. This adds up to 78% disagreeing in total for F3, compared to 43% completely disagree and 40% disagree for F1 readers.

The section regarding emotional engagement received few positive responses as well. Only 7% of all readers were emotionally affected by the story, with only 3% of F3 readers reporting to be affected. The other questions polling emotional engagement showed similar results: there was no question where more than 20% of respondents answered positively. F3 had the least total emotional engagement, an

average of only 7% of readers who responded positively compared to 82% who reported having no empathy towards the characters. Readers of F1 and F2 showed the most emotional engagement. F1 readers scored the highest on the second and third questions, with 11% reporting being emotionally affected by the story and 20% feeling empathy for the characters. 12% of F2 readers felt happy when Chih felt happy and thus scored the highest for this question. These slightly higher scores for F1 are in line with the emotional sequence question from the content questions where F1 readers also scored higher. Although F2 readers averaged the same emotional engagement (12%), they performed the worst on this sequence with only 58% of readers answering correctly. This might be because *die/die/diens* are traditionally demonstrative pronouns and might evoke a greater sense of distance to the referent.

A slightly different picture is shown with the section on attentional focus. More than half of the participants responded negatively on each question: 63% was easily distracted while reading, 53% found themselves thinking about other things, and 62% had a hard time keeping their mind on the story. F1 readers reported slightly less narrative presence than readers of the other fragments (68%, 55%, and 63%, respectively). F3 readers were the most present: 28% responded that they did not feel distracted, and 37% never thought of other things. The last question regarding keeping one's mind on the story was answered the most positively by F2 readers with 21%. Overall F3 readers scored slightly higher on attentional focus, but the differences between the several groups were minimal once more.

For the subgroup relating to the programmes respondents were enrolled in, the group of non-language-focused programmes reported higher amounts of narrative understanding of more than 10% per question. When checked against the content questions, both groups performed equally, with a slight advantage of 2% more correct answers for the language programmes. This latter group was clearly better at the sequence questions while the non-language programmes performed better on two of the other content questions. Language-focused programmes scored higher for narrative presence: 65% reported loss of the story world when they were done reading, compared to 32% for the non-language students. For emotional engagement, both groups polled equally, although 10% more of language students (88%) reported not being touched by the story. Lastly, attentional focus. Respondents from non-language-focused programmes were slightly less distracted: only 27% did not agree with the statement that they sometimes thought about other things while reading compared to 38% for the language students. Only 58% of the former group reported that they found it hard to keep their mind on the story compared to the 68% of the latter group.

If we look at the fragments individually, we see that readers of F2 who are enrolled in language-focused programmes performed better compared to the general results as well as to the overall F2 results. There was only one question where less than 50% of readers answered correctly, which was the last interpersonal question: *Chih has seen the Emperess of Salt and Fortune*. F2 readers enrolled in language-focused programmes scored the highest overall score of 70% of respondents who answered the content questions correctly. F2 non-language-focused programmes readers scored worse on the content questions, only 56% answers were correct. F1 non-language respondents did slightly better

than the respondents from language programmes. Regarding narrative engagement, non-language programmes were the most engaged when reading F1, while language-focused programmes preferred F3. F2 was split equally between the two groups. It appears that students enrolled in language-focused programmes on the one hand are more comfortable with *hen/hen/hun* pronouns, although this was not quite reflected in the scores of the content questions. On the other hand, students who were enrolled in non-language programmes preferred *die/hen/hun* pronouns and this preference was also reflected in their scores. Based on the content questions, one could conclude that students in language-focused programmes had little trouble with *die/die/diens* pronouns although they did not experience this themselves as seen by the self-reporting in the narrative section.

Compared with the general scores, most respondents reported similar scores of narrative engagement on all four categories within all fragments. Overall, respondents enrolled in language programmes who read F2 answered more positively on the narrative presence and emotional engagement sections while F3 readers reported more narrative understanding and attentional focus. Four questions received zero positive answers from F1 language programme readers; these consist of all questions regarding narrative understanding, the last question on narrative presence (“sometimes the story world felt closer than the real world while reading”) and the first question in the emotional engagement section (“when Chih felt happy in the story, I was happy as well and when Chih felt scared, I was too”). No F3 readers agreed to this question on narrative presence as well. 81% of F2 readers reported feeling a sudden loss of the story world when they were done reading, which was the highest of all respondents. Respondents who were enrolled in non-language-focused programs reported equal amounts of narrative understanding and narrative presence among all fragments. F2 readers reported a higher amount of attentional focus and F1 readers reported more emotional engagement. F3 readers reported the least emotional engagement as no respondents reported positively on the first two questions.

The regular readers and readers who read mostly English reported slightly higher narrative understanding compared to the overall results. This was also reflected in their content scores. Mostly-English readers have the highest overall score and regular readers the third highest. These groups averaged 69% and 64% respectively, compared to the overall average score of 61%. Narrative presence scores revealed nothing interesting as these were in line with the average. Mostly-English readers scored 10 points more on the question regarding empathy, 27% of them reported feeling sorry for the characters compared to the average of 17%. Regular and mostly-English readers were slightly less distracted while reading as there were more respondents who reported never finding their mind wandering, having trouble keeping their mind on the story or never thinking about other things. This suggests that reading regularly might have an impact on narrative engagement.

When looking at the fragments’ distribution for regular readers and English readers, we see that these groups reported higher narrative understanding than the average of all fragments and this was also reflected in their content scores. Only F1 respondents who read regularly had less correct answers than the average F1 reader. F2 readers scored very high on the content questions: 74% of mostly-English

readers answered correctly and 70% of regular readers. F3 readers also scored several points above the average of their fragment, 68% for regular readers and 70% for respondents who read mostly in English. Only F3 respondents who read regularly scored better on narrative presence than the average F3 readers, although they scored below average on emotional engagement. Regular readers and respondents who reported reading mostly in English scored better on attentional focus and emotional engagement. Respondents who read regularly reported the most narrative engagement for F3 and respondents who read mostly in English were tied between F1 and F2. Both groups' F1 readers reported the highest emotional engagement which was in line with the average of all readers.

For the results from the three different provinces, all respondents from West- or East-Flanders seemed to have trouble understanding what happened in the story. F2 readers were very neutral on the second statement regarding one's understanding of the characters: 75% remained neutral and the remaining 25% said they had clear understanding. This statement was the only where F3 readers answered positively: 33% reported clear understanding. Regarding narrative presence, this last group reported the greatest loss of the story world (67%). None of the F1 readers agreed with the first statement regarding transportation into the story world while none of the F2 readers disagreed. A majority of readers of both respondents remained neutral on this statement. None of the F2 readers reported feeling like the story world was closer. This section on narrative presence seemed to really divide the respondents from West- and East-Flanders. F2 readers reported no emotional engagement on all three questions and F3 readers on two out of the three questions. F1 readers showed the most emotional engagement both in people agreeing with the statements and having the least respondents disagreeing. Lastly, F2 readers reported high attentional focus: 75% never thought about other things while reading nor had a hard time keeping their mind on the story. The group respondents from West- and East-Flanders (16 people) was the smallest group, but also the most divided group. It seems that they have a slight preference for F2, *die/die/diens* but a bigger sample is needed to reach conclusions on this group.

For respondents from Antwerp, F1 readers reported the least narrative understanding. This was also reflected in their answers on the content questions. Readers of the second fragment reported the highest narrative understanding, with a total of 26% never agreeing to the statements. Regarding narrative presence, F1 readers reported the least absorption into the story world as well. Only 11% total agreed with the statements in this section. F2 readers were the only group of respondents from Antwerp to report feeling like the story world was closer than the real word while reading. This group agreed the most with the statements in this section. F2 and F3 readers reported the highest emotional engagement, 10% agreed with the statements. For F2 however, there were also the least respondents who disagreed: a total of 75% readers were never emotionally engaged with the story compared to 82% and 84% for F1 and F3 respectively. F3 scored the highest on attentional focus, but there was an equal split among the respondents reporting having thought about other things while readers and respondents reporting never having thought about other things. On the other questions polling attentional focus, this group also scored the highest as 10% more readers responded positively compared to both F1 and F2 readers.

Overall, the fragment using *die/die/diens* (F2) seemed to be the easiest understood by readers from Antwerp.

A different picture emerged with the respondents from Limburg. Here respondents who read F1 reported the highest narrative understanding while scoring in line with the average for Limburg. Interestingly, 100% F3 readers reported that they did not understand the characters and none of the F3 readers reported that they never had trouble following the thread of the story, but this group scored the highest on the content questions for all readers from Limburg. F1 readers followed close on this score, although they only answered 53% of the questions correctly. The difference in the scores for both groups is negligible however. Regarding narrative presence, F1 reported the least loss of story world, only 20% experienced this compared to 60% and 64% for F2 and F3. The scores on the other questions were comparable although none of the F3 readers reported mental transportation into the story world. Only 10% of F1 and F2 readers responded positively to this statement, but 50% and 60% responded negatively. This implied that F2 readers were overall slightly more transported. F2 readers were also the most emotionally engaged albeit also very little, 20% overall. None of the F3 readers reported agreeing with the statements of this section and only 10% of F1 readers felt sorry for the characters while none agreed with the other two statements. However, this latter group showed the most attentional focus with an overall score of 30% agreeing to the statements. The last statement in this section, on keeping one's mind on the story yielded very different results. None of the F2 readers never experienced trouble while 80% agreed to the statement. Compared to the other fragments, only 44% of F3 readers and 60% of F1 readers reported having trouble. Readers from Limburg seemed split between better understanding *die/hen/hun* (F1) and *die/die/diens* (F2), with a slight preference for the former.

The last subgroup that was looked at in more detail was respondents who reported knowing queer people. All readers reported having trouble understanding the text, although the content questions show a significant difference between F1 and F2. The former averaged only 42% correct answers while the latter scored 68%. Regarding narrative presence, F2 readers reported the highest agreement with the statements. This group reported feeling like the story world was closer than the real world three times as much compared to the other groups (31% compared to 9%(F1) and 6% (F2)). 72% of F3 reader reported never feeling transportation into the story compared to 50% and 44% of F1 and F2 readers respectively. F1 reported the highest emotional engagement with an overall score of 18% agreeing with the statements. F2 reported the highest attentional focus, with 44% never thinking about other things while reading. Respondents who know queer people scored the best when reading fragment 2 using *die/die/diens*. This might be because people these respondents know how to use these pronouns as they could know people who use these pronouns in real life and are more exposed to them. As this was not asked, there is no way of knowing for certain.

It seems like the text using *die/die/diens* pronouns results in slightly higher narrative engagement. Only respondents from Limburg, respondents enrolled in language programmes, and respondents who read regularly had more categories where they scored *hen/hen/hen* pronouns higher. There might be an

impact of the dialect spoken in this region. The Dutch respondents of Vos and Nutters' (2022) research found a slight preference for *hen/hun* pronouns as well. There might be an influence of dialect on preference for pronouns, but more research is needed to reach sound conclusions on this hypothesis. Frequency of exposure to Dutch-language texts might also have an impact as regular readers and students enrolled in language-focused programmes also slightly preferred *hen/hen/hen* pronouns. Vos and Nutters' (2022) respondents also reported high language contact. The differences in my research are too small to reach a sound conclusion on this as well.

Style and grammaticality

Just like in Vos and Nutters (2022), half of all respondents called the fragment grammatically correct: 50% agreed to the positive statement and 47% disagreed to the negative statement that was used as a control. When looking at the link between grammaticality and appreciation of style, we see that only 17% found the text stylistically pleasing. The negative control question showed a slightly different picture; here 40% did not agree to calling the text stylistically ugly. This might be linked to the genre and setting of the text. As mentioned above, several respondents commented that they found the text vague and confusing. These findings might have influenced the aesthetic appreciation of the text. The results of the question polling reading enjoyment supports this theory. Only 11% of all readers reported finding the text fun to read.

When looking at the results for the different pronouns, we see that 63% (the average of the positive and negative control question) of F2 readers found this version grammatical. F3 readers were less positive, only 40% called the text grammatical. The same average figure was found for F1 readers, although 49% agreed to the positive statement compared to 41% for F3. 43% of F1 readers remained neutral on the question polling the ungrammaticality. The well-known plural nature of *hen/hen/hun* pronouns combined with a singular verb might be the cause of these low rates on grammaticality for F3. This fragment was also responsible the lowest scores on the statements regarding style and reading enjoyment: 13% and 6% respectively. This latter figure was half of what the readers of the other fragments reported. F1 readers reported the highest scores for these statements, although with only a two-point advantage on F2.

Although half of the readers reported having no qualms about the grammaticality of the text, there were very little respondents calling the text *soepel* (smooth, 9%) or *vlot* (fluent, 12%). Respondents were slightly more positive in the negative control questions: 20% did not find the text *stroef* (stilted) nor *traag* (slow). Once again, F2 readers were more positive: 15% found the text smooth compared to 6% of F1 and F3 readers, and 18% found the text fluent, compared to 11% of F1 readers and 6% of F2 readers. F3 reported the most issues with the text: 81% did not agree to experiencing the text as smooth, with half of all F3 totally disagreeing. This was a ten-point difference compared to F1 and a 21-point difference to F2. The negative control question also showed a 12- to 20-point difference: only 9% reported not finding the text stilted (F1:29%, F2:21%). F3 readers scored the highest percentage for disagreement regarding fluency of the text as well: 82%, at least 17% more than the other fragments.

In the comments, respondents of F3 reported trouble with the sentence structure which might suggest that the *hen/hen/hun* pronouns were the cause of these lower scores.

For the part on mental imagery, F2 readers showed the most transportation: 51% reported seeing mental image of Chih and the situations, and 63% reported seeing a mental image of the story environment. The latter statement was the only where F1 readers scored higher than F3 readers: 57% compared to 44%. Only 31% of F1 readers reported seeing a mental image of Chih while reading. Regarding Chih's experienced gender, the majority of readers reported a neutral image by either remaining neutral or disagreeing with the asked gender. Approximately a third of all readers (F1: 32%, F2: 27%, F3 :44%) reported experiencing Chih as male, opposed to 17%, 30% and 6% who reported a female image. These results imply that *hen/hen/hun* pronouns might conjure a male image slightly more than other pronouns. *Die/die/diens* had the opposite effect and might have female associations. The text does have a line where Rabbit calls Chih "girl" before correcting herself later in the chapter (N. Vo, 2020, p.13 and p.15), but it seems this had little impact on the perceived gender. Three respondents mentioned in the comments that the pronouns were the motivator for disagreeing with the gender statements. One other respondent said the associations they had from the name were the reason they chose female. One other respondent explained that the word *geestelijke* (cleric) made them think about a man. This might have been the case for several other readers as well and could explain the slightly higher numbers of respondents who had a male experience of Chih.

Respondents enrolled in language-focused programmes in school reported slightly more reading enjoyment compared to the average, except F1 readers where only 6% agreed to having enjoyed the text compared to 25% of F2 readers and 13% of F3 readers. Compared to respondents who were enrolled in non-language-focused programmes, only F1 readers reported some reading enjoyment (29%, which is slightly higher than the F1 average and 17% more readers than the language-focused group). Readers of all fragments in the language-focused group found the text slightly more stylistically pleasing than average, both in agreement with the positive statement and in disagreement with finding the text stylistically ugly. Overall F1 readers found the text the most beautiful, while F2 readers disagreed the most with the negative statement. For the non-language students, no F3 readers found the text stylistically beautiful, although 57% reported not finding the fragment stylistically ugly. 17% and 18% of F1 and F2 readers respectively found the text beautiful compared to 45% and 35% finding the style ugly.

F1 and F2 readers who were enrolled in language-focused programmes found the text slightly more grammatically correct than the average of their respective groups while 13% less F3 readers agreed. F2 readers found the text the most grammatically correct, with 69% agreeing and 81% not agreeing to finding the text ungrammatical. Only 28% of F3 readers of language students found the text grammatical, while this fragment scored the highest regarding grammaticality with students enrolled in non-language-focused programmes (57%). Respondents enrolled in language-focused programmes did not find the text smooth, only 6% of F2 readers agreed to this statement while none of the F1 or F3 readers did. The scores on fluency of the text are low as well; once again no F1 readers and 19% and 6% of F2 and F3

readers respectively agreed to finding the text fluent. Respondents from non-language-focused programmes found the text slightly smoother and more fluent, although there were also slightly more respondents from this group who found it stilted and slow. Respondents enrolled in non-language-focused programmes seemed to marginally prefer F1 while F2 readers reported the highest positive reader reception in both the positive and negative control questions in the group of respondents enrolled in language programmes.

F2 readers who were enrolled in language-focused programmes in school reported the highest degree of mental imagery as well: 75% agreed on each question in this section. Fewer readers of the other fragments agreed with the statements. F2 readers also reported the highest number of gendered connotations within the category of respondents who were enrolled in language-focused programmes. 44% perceived Chih as male while 19% perceived them as female. Compared to the respondents who were enrolled in non-language programmes, F2 scored the lowest on mental imagery with F3 readers reporting the highest amounts of mental imagery. Regarding gendered connotations for Chih, only 12% of F2 readers experienced Chih as male, which is 15% less than the average for F2, but they scored higher on a female experience for Chih (41%). F1 and F3 readers had slightly more male connotations than their averages while the percentage of respondents who had perceived Chih as female remained the same. Overall, the most connotations were neutral for both groups.

When looking at students who reported reading often, we see that although their enjoyment of the text was in line with the averages per fragment, the scores regarding grammaticality were not. 22% more F1 readers and 13% and 16% less F2 and F3 readers found the text grammatically correct. No F3 readers reported finding the text stylistically beautiful, smooth or fluent. The amount of F1 and F2 respondents who found the text smooth and fluent were in line with the averages of these fragments, although there was a higher number of people who reported finding the story stilted or slow. Regarding mental imagery, F1 readers scored remarkably higher as well. More than half of the respondents reported seeing mental images of Chih (50%), the situations (64%), and the environment (85%) of the story. 57% of F1 readers experienced Chih as male, and 21% as female. F3 readers also found Chih more male (54%), and none of these respondents reported experiencing Chih as female. F2 readers did find Chih more female, 40% perceived Chih as woman compared to 20% experiencing them as male. Reading regularly seemed to have a slight impact on impressions of grammaticality, but not quite on the stylistic impressions of the text nor the mental imagery the text evoked. F1 readers seemed the most positively impacted.

Readers who reported reading mostly in English were mostly in line with the average scores as well, although slightly more respondents of all fragments reported finding the text ungrammatical. F1 readers had similar scores to F1 readers of the respondents who read often, but the other fragments also show a slight increase in mental imagery. Compared to the averages of their fragments, 12% more F2 readers (63%) had an image of Chih and 20% more F3 readers (64%) could imagine the story environment. Only 9% of F2 readers reported experiencing Chih as male, compared to 50% of F1 and 63% of F3, although this latter group never perceived Chih as female. F1 and F3 readers who reported reading

regularly and who read mostly in English seem to have experienced Chih as more male than the average respondent. As there are more English stories with non-binary characters, readers who regularly read in English have a higher chance of exposure to these types of pronouns. The results from this questionnaire did not show a clear impact of this. Respondents who reported reading often and who read mostly in English had overall a more gendered view of Chih compared to the average. These groups scored slightly higher on the mental imagery questions as well, which might indicate that reading often also has an impact on one's capabilities to create a clear mental image of a story.

The results for the provinces are in line with the general findings as F2 readers reported the most positively. Interesting was that for readers from Limburg only 20% reported enjoying reading the story and these all read F1. Similarly, only the F1 readers from West- and East-Flanders (28%) reported enjoyment. Readers from Limburg found the text the least stylistically pleasing: 10% F1 and F2 readers did so. Compared to 50% of readers from West- and East-Flanders who found the text stylistically pleasing. Readers from Antwerp found F1 the most pleasing with 27% reporting so. No F1 readers from Antwerp and Limburg and no F3 readers from West- and East-Flanders found the text smooth. For the control question, F1 readers from Limburg were the only group who reported never finding the text stilted. The control question here contradicts the positive question. The control question for respondents of West- and East-Flanders also shows interesting results. 71% of F1 readers and 75% of F2 readers reported never finding the text stilted while none of the F3 readers did. This was also the case for opinions on the fluency of the text: none of the F3 readers from Limburg and West- and East-Flanders found the text fluent. Respondents from Antwerp preferred this version over F1: twice as many respondents found F3 more fluent than F1, although F2 is found the most fluent by respondents from Antwerp (16%) and Limburg (20%). Respondents from West- and East-Flanders found F1 the most fluent, although F2 scored best on the negative control question with 50% never finding the text slow. Regarding grammaticality received F2 the highest scores: 63% from Antwerp and 70% from Limburg. Half of the respondents from West- and East-Flanders found the texts grammatically correct.

F2 readers from Antwerp had the highest mental imagery by a margin ranging from 10 to 41 points compared to the other fragments. Readers from Limburg had very low mental imagery across all fragments: 27% had a mental image of Chih while reading and 31% could image the situations. The third question scored slightly higher: an average of 45% could picture the story environment, with 50% of F1 and F2 readers being able to do so. Respondents from West- and East-Flanders had the best mental imagery scores with F1; they scored an average of 75% on all statements compared to half of F2 and F3 readers agreeing on all questions. Regarding Chih's experienced gender, a majority answered neutral. F3 readers from Antwerp were the only group where more than half of the respondents answered having a male connotation for Chih. F3 from West- and East-Flanders never experienced Chih as female. F2 readers from Limburg and West- and East-Flanders reported the highest female connotation, 40% of the former group and 50% of the latter agreed to the statement "I experienced Chih as female." This last group also reported never experiencing Chih as male. More research would be needed to determine the influence of dialect on these results.

The last subgroup to be looked at in more detail is respondents who know queer people. Most scores are in line with the general results, but the low number of respondents who found the text grammatically correct was interesting. The average score was 9%, with 14% of F1 readers and 6% of F2 and F3 readers who reported finding this text grammatically correct. Compared to the average score of 50% for all respondents, is this a surprisingly low number. One would expect that people who come in contact with the queer community are more open or used to the linguistic innovations of this community. This group also had slightly more gendered associations for Chih. More F1 readers reported a male image (41% compared to 32%) and less experienced Chis as female (9% compared to 17%). F2 and F3 readers experienced Chih more as female compared to the average, although the number of respondents having male connotations remained the same.

Interesting is also the group who commented negative things about queer people when asked about knowing queer people. These four respondents scored slightly lower on the questions regarding narrative engagement and also scored remarkably lower on the content questions. Interestingly, half of them did also score the text as grammatically correct and their gendered connotations for Chih were largely neutral. One respondent, who read F2, reported seeing a male image for Chih.

Regarding the overall translation reception and mental imagery, we see that F2 scored the highest on almost all categories and across all the different groups. F1 readers scored the same as F1 a couple of times, but overall the *die/die/diens* pronouns were the best received. There were only small margins between the different groups so more research will be needed to make a general consensus. For the gender experienced for Chih, we see that F3 with *hen/hun/hun* pronouns had the most male perception while F2 with *die/die/diens* was most often interpreted as female, although the majority was neutral.

HIGHEST	CQ	NU	AF	NP	EE	TR+	TR-	MI	♂	♀
ALL	F2/F3	F3/F2	F3	F2	F1	F2	F1/F2	F2	F3	F2
LANGUAGE	F2	F3	F2/F3	F3	F1	F2	F2	F2	F2	F1
NON-LANGUAGE	F2	F2	F2	F1	F1	-	-	F3	F3	F2
READS	F3	F3	F3	F2	F2	F1/-	F2	F2	F1	F2
READS EN	F3	-	F2	-	F1	F1	F2	F1	F3	F2
ANTWERP	F2	F1	F3	F2	F3	F2	F2	F2	F3	F2
LIMBURG	F3	F1	F1	F3/F2	F2	F2	F3	-	F1/F3	F2
FLANDERS	F2	-	F1	F3	F2	F1/F2	F2	F1/F2	F3	F2
QUEER	F2	F1	F2	F2	F1	F1/F2	F2	F2	F1/F3	F2

Table 1: Fragment that scored the highest percentages per category.

Open questions

When asked about their experience with the non-binary pronouns, 35 people left a comment with a majority of them being from F3 readers. 15 respondents found the pronouns confusing, weird or difficult. Multiple people reported having trouble with knowing who the pronouns referred to. People also questioned the grammaticality of the non-binary pronouns calling it 'ungrammatical' or referencing the royal we as the only time a singular person can be referred to with a plural pronoun. Respondents who

read F3, which used *hen/hen/hun* pronouns, also reported having trouble with the traditionally plural nature and object status of these pronouns. The higher number of people commenting on the ungrammaticality might be linked to the combination of *hen* with a verb in the third person singular (e.g., “*hen wist*”).

The majority of comments on the question polling the reading experience were negative (71%), although seven people also reported positively towards the non-binary pronouns. Two people mentioned that they had to figure out how the pronouns functioned, but after doing so, their reading experience was improved. One respondent mentioned that they did not notice that Chih was non-binary at first and thought that the pronouns were a translation error. They mentally changed the pronouns to *hij* (he) and after a while they got used to the *hen/hen/hun* pronouns and could read without any problem. This ‘trick’ did influence their experience of Chih’s gender as they perceive them as male. This might also imply that informing the respondents of the translated nature of the text might have impacted their reading experiences. Three others did not find it disruptive; one even mentioned they did not notice the non-binary pronouns. One participant, who read F3 commented that they use *zij/haar/hen/hun* pronouns, which were the pronouns used in the fragment she read as well. They were also one of the two respondents who correctly answered all content questions. The familiarity they have with these pronouns might be an explanation for this. This familiarity with genderqueer issues is also shown in her comment after the questions regarding mental imagery, as they also wrote “*Chih gebruikt hen-voornaamwoorden, dus er is veel kans dat hen non-binair, demigender of intersex is*” (Chih uses *hen*-pronouns, so there is a high probability that they are non-binary, demi-gender or intersex). Interesting was that although they reported very high narrative understanding, attentional focus, immersion into the story, mental imagery and enjoyment in reading the story, they did not find the fragment grammatically correct nor stylistically pretty at all. They also reported not finding the text fluent or smooth, on both the positive and negative control questions.

In total, 76 people responded to the question: “Do you know a different pronoun to refer to non-binary people?” Half of the respondents replied that they did not know any other pronouns, 15 F1 readers, 11 F2 and 10 F3. 21% mentioned the third person neuter pronoun *het* (it) without any explanation. Several people also mentioned *hen*, *hun*, or *die*, either in a set (like *hen/hun*) or the pronoun only. Six respondents raised a new option: the third person plural *zij*. Three people clarified that they meant the plural form and not the third person singular. Two others offered the set *zij/hun*. This might be inspired by the English pronouns *they/them*, which are also third person plural pronouns. This use was also raised by Van Oostendorp (2021), although he suggested keeping the traditional pair of *zij* and *haar*. One person commented a set of neopronouns *xe/xir* and another said they did not know other pronouns but that they know of people using all pronouns. A F3 reader suggested *die* in spoken language but added that they found it a “bit impolite”. They were the only person to have raised this concern regarding politeness in this survey.

Conclusion

The literature review showed that gender-neutral and non-binary language is based on the language in which it is used, and no direct solutions can be copied from other languages. At the same time, different languages were shown to often follow the same strategies to create this new non-binary language. Many languages create new vocabulary in order to accommodate non-binary people, but these linguistic innovations are often based on already existing language forms, especially for pronouns. The creation of non-binary pronouns follows two main routes: mixing the two gendered third person pronouns like in Danish and French and thus creating neo-pronouns, or expanding the use of neuter or plural pronouns into the singular like in English, Dutch or Czech. When this latter strategy is used, similar concerns are raised in the different languages: the use of the neuter can be seen as dehumanizing and the use of plural pronouns as singular could cause unclear reference.

A tendency in languages with grammatical gender is that they tend to have more linguistic innovation regarding non-binary language because they have more instances where gender is indicated, such as in adjective agreement. Unfortunately, these innovations are often limited to a written medium and cannot be pronounced, as the various gender-neutral innovations in French and German demonstrate. Although these innovations are still important from a gender-neutral perspective, they often do not offer solutions for non-binary people in spoken contexts. The importance of the translator is also raised in this regard. Several studies have shown the impact of literature on real-world perceptions and attitudes, and translation can help to bring in and normalise these new identities and language. Studies have shown that seeing and reading texts with gender-neutral language and new language phenomena increases attitudes and use, as discussed in the literature review.

Insights from gender-neutral language prove hopeful as they show that languages are open and able to change. As the struggle for gender-neutral and non-sexist, female-oriented language has been fought for almost half a century, we can already see the impact this fight has had on attitudes and usage. Languages have more gender-neutral vocabulary and attitudes on the use of gender-neutral and female-oriented language have improved. The case of the gender-neutral and non-binary Swedish pronoun *hen* also proves hopeful for other languages, including Dutch. It shows that although this type of language innovation seems daunting at first, attitudes and practices can change relatively quickly. This is also reflected in the studies on the impact of literature and exposure.

Regarding my experiment on non-binary pronouns in Dutch, the findings are similar to those of Vos and Nutters (2022). There are only small differences in how the respondents experienced the different pronouns. Most variables tested seem to score slightly better with *die/die/diens* pronouns, although these raise a slightly more feminine image of the character. Overall, reading engagement and translation reception scores were low for all pronoun sets. There is no clear-cut preference for one set over another which implies all sets are viable to become the 'standard' set of non-binary pronouns.

The dialect people speak might also impact on how they perceive and how quickly they get used to non-binary pronouns. Respondents from West- and East-Flanders as well as respondents from Antwerp scored slightly higher with *die/die/diens* pronouns while respondents from Limburg as well as the Dutch respondents in Vos and Nutters (2022) responded more positively to *hen/hen/hun* pronouns. A more in-depth study may reach a more concrete conclusion on this. Another similarity and possible link between this study and the study conducted by Vos and Nutters (2022) is a slight preference for *hen/hen/hun* pronouns from people who regularly interact with languages, such as people who read often and people enrolled in language-focused programmes in school.

It appears that knowing queer people had no real impact on how respondents experienced non-binary pronouns. A possible explanation might be that most respondents mainly know cisgender people, as some volunteered in the comments, and thus are not exposed to the more experimental language non-cis queer people use. Regular exposure to non-binary pronouns might also impact the perception and readability of these pronouns as the only respondent who used *hen/hun* pronouns was one of two people who answered all content questions correctly. Interestingly, they did not find the fragment grammatically correct nor stylistically beautiful. This might indicate that the genre of the text played an important role.

Regarding gendered impressions of the pronouns, it can be concluded that *die/die/diens* were found more female while *hen/hen/hun* were found slightly more male. Overall, most respondents experienced the pronouns as neutral. A new option that was raised by respondents in the questionnaire was *zij/hun*, possibly influenced by the English they/them pronouns.

Overall, it seems like the fantasy genre and the book's Asian setting might have added an extra layer of difficulty which might have overshadowed the non-binary pronouns in the text. Several respondents stated finding the text too difficult or too vague. These concerns were also reflected in the results of the content questions and the overall reception of the text. A text set in a more recognisable place might have produced different results. It is unclear if low reception and understanding of the text were caused by the non-binary pronouns or the nature of the text itself. Overall, more research is needed to reach general conclusions.

Another limitation of this study was the relatively low number of useable answers, as there were only 100 respondents who filled out the questionnaire completely and fell within the narrow age range set for this study. As all respondents were Belgian and mostly spoke Flemish Dutch, I tried to compare my results to the results of Vos and Nutters (2022) to create a more complete overall image of Dutch-speakers' perceptions of non-binary pronouns, but as the respondent profiles of both studies had little to no overlap, no sound overarching conclusions can be made. Their shared methodology did produce comparable results, however, and provide a methodological basis for future research in this important area.

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Appendix

Informed consent document questionnaire



faculteit Letteren
Faculteit Sociale
Wetenschappen



Geïnformeerde toestemming

Titel van het onderzoek:

Listening to the Young

Naam + contactgegevens promotor en onderzoeker(s):

Lisa Van Poucke

lisa.vanpoucke@student.kuleuven.be

0497731280

Faculteit Letteren, Campus Antwerpen

Promotor:

Dr. Jack McMartin

jack.mcmartin@kuleuven.be

Groep HW, campussen Antwerpen

Onderzoeksgroep Vertaling en Interculturele Transfer, Campussen Antwerpen

Doel en methodologie van het onderzoek:

Reader response vragenlijst om de leeservaring van jongeren te testen bij het lezen van een vertaalde Young Adult fantasy roman.

Duur van het experiment:

Het fragment zal ongeveer 10 minuten in beslag nemen om te lezen. De vragenlijst over de gelezen tekst zal ongeveer 10 tot 15 minuten in beslag nemen.

- Ik begrijp wat van mij verwacht wordt tijdens dit onderzoek.
- Ik weet dat ik zal deelnemen aan volgende proeven of testen:
Online vragenlijst over een gelezen tekstfragment.
- Ik weet dat er risico's of ongemakken kunnen verbonden zijn aan mijn deelname:
Ik zou me ongemakkelijk kunnen voelen bij de vragen met betrekking tot de LGBTQIA+-gemeenschap in de vragenlijst.
- Ikzelf of anderen kunnen baat bij dit onderzoek hebben op volgende wijze:

Mijn deelname helpt de maatschappij door het begrip rond de attitudes van jongeren over vertaalde Young Adult literatuur in kaart te brengen.

- Mijn deelname levert een bijdrage aan het wetenschappelijk onderzoek. Ik weet dat ik geen verdere beloning of compensatie voor mijn deelname zal ontvangen.
- Ik begrijp dat mijn deelname aan deze studie vrijwillig is. Ik heb het recht om mijn deelname op elk moment stop te zetten. Daarvoor hoef ik geen reden te geven en ik weet dat daaruit geen nadeel voor mij kan ontstaan.

Voor de verdere verwerking van de verzamelde gegevens geldt het algemeen belang als rechtsgrond volgens de AVG/GDPR. Stopzetting van deelname aan de studie houdt dus in dat de eerder verzamelde gegevens nog verder rechtsgeldig kunnen worden betrokken in de studie en niet moeten worden verwijderd door KU Leuven.

- Ik begrijp dat in de context van dit onderzoek gegevens worden verzameld die volgens de Algemene Verordening Gegevensbescherming als bijzonder gevoelig worden beschouwd. Ik geef dan ook expliciet mijn toestemming om deze gegevens in de context van dit onderzoek te verzamelen. Het gaat om de volgende gegevens:
Ik heb personen in mijn omgeving die deel uit maken van de LGBTQIA+-gemeenschap.

- De resultaten van dit onderzoek kunnen gebruikt worden voor wetenschappelijke doeleinden en mogen gepubliceerd worden. Mijn naam wordt daarbij niet gepubliceerd. Doorheen het onderzoek zullen mijn gegevens steeds vertrouwelijk behandeld worden. De onderzoekers zullen de volgende maatregelen nemen om mijn privacy te beschermen:

Alle gegevens worden automatisch geanonimiseerd. De data zullen op geen enkele manier herleid kunnen worden tot mij.

- Ik wil graag op de hoogte gehouden worden van de resultaten van dit onderzoek. De onderzoeker mag mij hiervoor contacteren op het e-mailadres dat ik in de enquête zal invullen.

- Voor vragen evenals voor de uitoefening van mijn rechten (inzage gegevens, correctie ervan,...) weet ik dat ik na mijn deelname terecht kan bij:

Lisa Van Poucke: lisa.vanpoucke@student.kuleuven.be

Meer informatie met betrekking tot privacy in onderzoek kan ik terugvinden op www.kuleuven.be/privacy.

Verdere vragen over privacyaspecten kan ik richten tot de functionaris voor gegevensbescherming:

dpo@kuleuven.be

- Deze studie werd beoordeeld en goedgekeurd door de Sociaal-Maatschappelijke Ethische Commissie (SMEC) van KU Leuven (G-2023-6717). Voor eventuele klachten of andere bezorgdheden omtrent ethische aspecten van deze studie kan ik contact opnemen met SMEC: smec@kuleuven.be

- Ik weet dat ik bij onderstaande terecht kan indien ik na het onderzoek ongemakken of moeilijkheden ervaar als gevolg van de thema's die in het onderzoek aan bod kwamen:

Ik kan altijd de onderzoeker, Lisa Van Poucke, contacteren met vragen op het emailadres:

lisa.vanpoucke@student.kuleuven.be

Ik heb bovenstaande informatie gelezen en begrepen en heb antwoord gekregen op al mijn vragen betreffende deze studie. Ik stem toe om deel te nemen.

Door in de online vragenlijst op "ja" te klikken bij de eerste vraag, ga ik akkoord met de studie.

Naam en handtekening onderzoeker

Lisa Van Poucke

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Lisa Van Poucke', with a stylized, cursive script.

letteren.antwerpen@kuleuven.be

TEL. 03 502 15 00

Ik hou ook een exemplaar bij

Questionnaire

Enquete De keizerin van Zout en Voorspoed

Survey Flow

Standard: Intro (2 Questions)

Block: Demographics (5 Questions)

Standard: Leesgedrag (4 Questions)

BlockRandomizer: 1 - Evenly Present Elements

Standard: Fragment 1 (3 Questions)

Standard: Fragment 2 (3 Questions)

Standard: Fragment 3 (3 Questions)

Standard: Over het fragment (6 Questions)

Standard: Leeservaring (14 Questions)

Standard: Leeservaring nbvbw (5 Questions)

Standard: Herinnering consent (1 Question)

Page Break

Start of Block: Intro

Intro

Beste deelnemer

Allereerst heel erg bedankt voor je deelname aan dit onderzoek rond de leeservaring bij Young Adult romans. Mijn naam is Lisa Van Poucke en ik ben een master student Literair Vertalen aan de KU Leuven. Dit onderzoek staat onder begeleiding van Dr. Jack McMartin.

Voor mijn masterproef wil ik de leeservaring van jongeren testen bij het lezen van een vertaalde Young Adult fantasy roman. Hiervoor ontvang je een fragment uit 'De keizerin van Zout en Voorspoed' van Nghi Vo. Het fragment is vijf pagina's lang en duurt ongeveer tien minuten om te lezen. Daarna volgt een vragenlijst over de tekst die tien tot vijftien minuten in beslag zal nemen. In totaal zal de enquête ongeveer 20 minuten duren.

Als je interesse hebt om deel te nemen, download dan dit document met de geïnformeerde toestemming () voor je aan de enquête begint. Het is belangrijk dat je dit document bijhoudt. Als je vragen hebt, kun je me altijd contacteren op mijn e-mailadres lisa.vanpoucke@student.kuleuven.be.

Je deelname is volledig vrijwillig en je hebt op ieder moment de kans om met het onderzoek te stoppen. Alle antwoorden zijn volledig anoniem en zullen met niemand gedeeld worden. De antwoorden zullen enkel gebruikt worden in het kader van mijn onderzoek. De antwoorden zullen verwerkt worden volgens het algemeen belang als rechtsgrond volgens de AVG/GDPR. Indien je wil stoppen met de enquête zullen de gegevens nog steeds rechtsgeldig betrokken kunnen worden in het onderzoek. De antwoorden moeten niet verwijderd worden door de KU Leuven. Door de aard van het onderzoek zijn enkel de volledig ingevulde enquêtes bruikbaar.

Lisa Van Poucke

Consent Ik begrijp het en ga akkoord.

☐ Ja (1)

End of Block: Intro

Start of Block: Demographics

D1 Wat is je gender? Als jouw gender niet in de lijst staat, kun je die zelf toevoegen.

☐ Vrouw (1)

☐ Man (2)

☐ Non-binair (3)

☐ Zeg ik liever niet (4)

☐ Anders: (5) _____

D2 Wat is je leeftijd? Als jouw leeftijd niet in de lijst staat, kun je die zelf toevoegen.

☐ 16 (1)

☐ 17 (2)

☐ 18 (3)

☐ 19 (4)

☐ Anders: (5) _____

D3 Welke studierichting volg je?

D4 In welke provincie woon je? Als jouw provincie niet in de lijst staat, kun je die zelf toevoegen.

- ☐ West-Vlaanderen (1)
 - ☐ Oost-Vlaanderen (2)
 - ☐ Antwerpen (3)
 - ☐ Limburg (4)
 - ☐ Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest (5)
 - ☐ Anders: (6) _____
-

D5 Wat is je moedertaal? Als jouw moedertaal niet in de lijst staat, kun je die zelf toevoegen.

- ☐ Nederlands (1)
- ☐ Frans (2)
- ☐ Anders: (3) _____

End of Block: Demographics

Start of Block: Leesgedrag

D6 Lees je graag?

- ☐ Ja (1)
 - ☐ Nee (2)
 - ☐ Soms (3)
-

D7 Hoe vaak lees je?

- ☐ Eigenlijk nooit (1)
- ☐ Bijna nooit (2)
- ☐ Eens per trimester (3)
- ☐ Eens per maand (4)
- ☐ Een of twee keer per week (5)
- ☐ Elke dag (6)

Display This Question:

If Hoe vaak lees je? != Eigenlijk nooit

D8 In welke taal lees je het vaakst? Als je in een taal leest die niet in de lijst staat, kun je die zelf toevoegen.

- ☐ Nederlands (1)
- ☐ Frans (2)
- ☐ Engels (3)
- ☐ Anders: (4) _____

D9 Zijn er mensen in je directe omgeving die deel uit maken van de LGBTQIA+-gemeenschap? Als je wilt, kun je je antwoord toelichten.

End of Block: Leesgedrag

Start of Block: Fragment 1

F1_1 De onderstaande link brengt je naar het fragment. Je kunt het bestand ook downloaden als je dat makkelijker vindt om te lezen.

F1_2

De onderstaande link brengt je naar het fragment. Je kunt het bestand ook downloaden als je dat makkelijker vindt om te lezen.

F1_3 Ik heb het fragment gelezen en ben klaar om de rest van de enquête in te vullen.

☐ Ja (1)

End of Block: Fragment 1

Start of Block: Fragment 2

F2_1 De onderstaande link brengt je naar het fragment. Je kunt het bestand ook downloaden als je dat makkelijker vindt om te lezen.

F2_2

De onderstaande link brengt je naar het fragment. Je kunt het bestand ook downloaden als je dat makkelijker vindt om te lezen.

F2_3 Ik heb het fragment gelezen en ben klaar om de rest van de enquête in te vullen.

☐ Ja (1)

End of Block: Fragment 2

Start of Block: Fragment 3

F3_1 De onderstaande link brengt je naar het fragment. Je kunt het bestand ook downloaden als je dat makkelijker vindt om te lezen.

F3_2

De onderstaande link brengt je naar het fragment. Je kunt het bestand ook downloaden als je dat makkelijker vindt om te lezen.

F3_3 Ik heb het fragment gelezen en ben klaar om de rest van de enquête in te vullen.

☐ Ja (1)

End of Block: Fragment 3

Start of Block: Over het fragment



Q1_1 Duidt de stelling aan met de gebeurtenissen in volgorde zoals die in het fragment gebeurd zijn.
Als je wilt, kun je hieronder je antwoord toelichten.

- ☐ Chih gaat op verkenning door het dennenbosje, Chih komt aan bij het Scharlaken Meer, Chih spreekt met Konijn. In die volgorde. (1)
- ☐ Chih spreekt met Konijn, Chih gaat op verkenning door het dennenbosje, Chih komt aan bij het Scharlaken Meer. In die volgorde. (2)
- ☐ Chih komt aan bij het Scharlaken Meer, Chih spreekt met Konijn, Chih gaat op verkenning door het dennenbosje. In die volgorde. (3)

Q1_2 Hier kun je je antwoord bij de vorige vraag toelichten.

Page Break



Q2_1 Zijn de volgende stellingen juist volgens het fragment dat je hebt gelezen. Als je wilt, kun je hieronder je antwoord toelichten.

	Juist (1)	Fout (2)	Ik weet het niet (3)
Chih is een geestelijke uit de abdij in Zingende Heuvels. (1)	☐	☐	☐
De familie van Konijn woont in de buurt van het Scharlaken Meer. (2)	☐	☐	☐
Nagenoeg Briljant moedigt Chih aan om op verkenning te gaan. (3)	☐	☐	☐
Chih vertrouwt Konijn onmiddellijk. (4)	☐	☐	☐
Chih heeft de keizerin van Zout en Voorspoed ooit gezien. (5)	☐	☐	☐
In het Voorspoedige Lot gaat Chih slapen in een bed. (6)	☐	☐	☐
Nagenoeg Briljant is een vogel. (7)	☐	☐	☐
Konijn vindt de lichten van het Scharlaken Meer mooi. (8)	☐	☐	☐

Q2_2 Hier kun je je antwoord bij de vorige vraag toelichten.

Page Break



Q3_1 Duidt de stelling aan met de gebeurtenissen in volgorde zoals die in het fragment gebeurd zijn. Als je wilt, kun je hieronder je antwoord toelichten.

- ☐ Chih is bang wanneer de draagstoel voorbijkomt, Chih is verwonderd door de rode lichtjes op het Scharlaken Meer, Chih is blij tijdens het gesprek over Konijns verleden. In die volgorde. (1)
 - ☐ Chih is verwonderd door de rode lichtjes op het Scharlaken Meer, Chih is blij tijdens het over Konijns verleden, Chih is bang wanneer de draagstoel voorbijkomt. In die volgorde. (2)
 - ☐ Chih is blij tijdens het gesprek over Konijns verleden, Chih is bang wanneer de draagstoel voorbijkomt, Chih is verwonderd door de rode lichtjes op het Scharlaken Meer. In die volgorde. (3)
-

Q3_2 Hier kun je je antwoord bij de vorige vraag toelichten.

End of Block: Over het fragment

Start of Block: Leeservaring

Q4_1 Geef bij elke stelling aan hoeverre je het ermee eens bent; kies het antwoord dat het beste bij jouw leeservaring past. Als je wilt, kun je hieronder je antwoord toelichten.

	Helemaal niet mee eens (1)	Niet mee eens (2)	Niet mee eens en niet mee oneens (3)	Mee eens (4)	Helemaal mee eens (5)
Ik had een paar keer moeite om te begrijpen wat er in het fragment gebeurde. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ik begrijp niet goed hoe de personages in elkaar zitten. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ik had moeite om de rode draad van het verhaal te volgen. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q4_2 Hier kun je je antwoord bij de vorige vraag toelichten.

Q5_1 Geef bij elke stelling aan hoeverre je het ermee eens bent; kies het antwoord dat het beste bij jouw leeservaring past. Als je wilt, kun je hieronder je antwoord toelichten.

	Helemaal niet mee eens (1)	Niet mee eens (2)	Niet mee eens en niet mee oneens (3)	Mee eens (4)	Helemaal mee eens (5)
Ik merkte dat ik makkelijk afgeleid raakte tijdens het lezen. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ik dacht soms aan andere dingen terwijl ik aan het lezen was. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ik vond het moeilijk om mijn hoofd bij het verhaal te houden. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q5_2 Hier kun je je antwoord bij de vorige vraag toelichten.

Page Break

Q6_1 Geef bij elke stelling aan hoeverre je het ermee eens bent; kies het antwoord dat het beste bij jouw leeservaring past. Als je wilt, kun je hieronder je antwoord toelichten.

	Helemaal niet mee eens (1)	Niet mee eens (2)	Niet mee eens en niet mee oneens (3)	Mee eens (4)	Helemaal mee eens (5)
Tijdens het lezen zat mijn hoofd helemaal in de wereld van het verhaal. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Toen ik klaar was met lezen, was deze wereld die het verhaal opgeroepen had ineens weer helemaal verdwenen. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Tijdens het lezen voelde de wereld van het verhaal soms dichterbij dan de echte wereld. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q6_2 Hier kun je je antwoord bij de vorige vraag toelichten.

Q7_1 Geef bij elke stelling aan hoeverre je het ermee eens bent; kies het antwoord dat het beste bij jouw leeservaring past. Als je wilt, kun je hieronder je antwoord toelichten.

	Helemaal niet mee eens (1)	Niet mee eens (2)	Niet mee eens en niet mee oneens (3)	Mee eens (4)	Helemaal mee eens (5)
Toen Chih zich in het fragment blij voelde, was ik dat ook en als Chih bang was, was ik dat ook. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Het verhaal raakte me. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ik had medelijden met sommige personages in het verhaal. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q7_2 Hier kun je je antwoord bij de vorige vraag toelichten.

Q8_1 Geef bij elke stelling aan hoeverre je het ermee eens bent; kies het antwoord dat het beste bij jouw leeservaring past. Als je het (helemaal) eens bent met de stelling, kun je hieronder aangeven waarom en/of voorbeelden geven?

	Helemaal niet mee eens (1)	Niet mee eens (2)	Niet mee eens en niet mee oneens (3)	Mee eens (4)	Helemaal mee eens (5)
Ik vond het een plezierig fragment om te lezen. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ik heb het fragment ervaren als stilistisch mooi. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ik heb het fragment ervaren als soepel. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ik heb het fragment ervaren als vlot. (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ik heb het fragment ervaren als grammaticaal juist. (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q8_2 Hier kun je je antwoord bij de vorige vraag toelichten.

Page Break

Q9_1 Geef bij elke stelling aan hoeverre je het ermee eens bent; kies het antwoord dat het beste bij jouw leeservaring past. Als je het (helemaal) eens bent met de stelling, kun je hieronder aangeven waarom en/of voorbeelden geven?

	Helemaal niet mee eens (1)	Niet mee eens (2)	Niet mee eens en niet mee oneens (3)	Mee eens (4)	Helemaal mee eens (5)
Ik heb het fragment ervaren als stilistisch lelijk. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ik heb het fragment ervaren als stroef. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ik heb het fragment ervaren als traag. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ik heb het fragment ervaren als ongrammaticaal. (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q9_2 Hier kun je je antwoord bij de vorige vraag toelichten.

Q10_1 Geef bij elke stelling aan hoeverre je het ermee eens bent; kies het antwoord dat het beste bij jouw leeservaring past. Als je wilt, kun je hieronder je antwoord toelichten.

	Helemaal niet mee eens (1)	Niet mee eens (2)	Niet mee eens en niet mee oneens (3)	Mee eens (4)	Helemaal mee eens (5)
Tijdens het lezen van het fragment had ik een beeld van Chih voor mijn ogen. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Tijdens het lezen van het fragment kon ik de situaties die beschreven werden voor me zien. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ik kon me voorstellen hoe de omgeving waarin het verhaal zich afspeelt er uitzag. (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ik heb Chih ervaren als mannelijk. (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ik heb Chih ervaren als vrouwelijk. (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q10_2 Hier kun je je antwoord bij de vorige vraag toelichten.

End of Block: Leeservaring

Start of Block: Leeservaring nbvbw

Display This Question:

If Ik heb het fragment gelezen en ben klaar om de rest van de enquête in te vullen. = Ja

Q11_1

Hoe heb je het non-binaire persoonlijke voornaamwoord dat gebruikt werd om naar Chih te verwijzen ervaren? (die/hen/hun)

Bv.: "Chih vroeg zich af wat die moest doen toen de oude vrouw hen opmerkte."

Display This Question:

If Ik heb het fragment gelezen en ben klaar om de rest van de enquête in te vullen. = Ja

Q11_2

Hoe heb je het non-binaire persoonlijke voornaamwoord dat gebruikt werd om naar Chih te verwijzen ervaren? (die/die/diens)

Bv.: "Chih vroeg zich af wat die moest doen toen de oude vrouw die opmerkte."

Display This Question:

If ik heb het fragment gelezen en ben klaar om de rest van de enquête in te vullen. = Ja

Q11_3

Hoe heb je het non-binaire persoonlijke voornaamwoord dat gebruikt werd om naar Chih te verwijzen ervaren? (hen/hen/hun)

Bv.: "Chih vroeg zich af wat hen moest doen toen de oude vrouw hen opmerkte."

Q12 Ken je een ander persoonlijk voornaamwoord om non-binaire personen mee aan te duiden? Zo ja, geef aan welk voornaamwoord.

Q13 Heb je nog vragen of opmerkingen naar aanleiding van deze vragenlijst en/of het gelezen fragment?

M1 Ik wil graag op de hoogte gehouden worden van de resultaten van dit onderzoek. De onderzoeker mag mij hiervoor contacteren op dit e-mailadres:

End of Block: Leeservaring nbvbw

Start of Block: Herinnering consent

C2 Wanneer je op 'volgende' klikt, ga je er mee akkoord om deel te nemen in dit onderzoek zoals beschreven staat in het deelnemersinformatieblad. Je kunt dit document downloaden op deze link () als je dat nog niet gedaan had. Het is belangrijk dat je een exemplaar hiervan bijhoudt.

End of Block: Herinnering consent

Revised list of books with gender non-conforming characters

A Lake of Feathers and Moonbeams - Dax Murray, 2017. The non-binary protagonist Alexis uses *they/them* pronouns.

All City - Alex DiFrancesco, 2019, Seven Stories Press. The genderqueer protagonist Jesse uses *they/them* pronouns.

Atalanta Läufer_in - Lilly Axster (German), 2014, Fischer Sauerländer. The main character Atalanta is non-binary and uses a German neopronoun and switches between male and female accordance in German.

Blackfish City - Sam J. Miller, 2018, Ecco. The non-binary protagonist Soq uses *they/them* pronouns.

Black Sun – Rebecca Roanhorse, 2020m Gallery / Saga Press. The side character Iktan uses *they/them* pronouns.

Blanca & Roja - Anna-Marie McLemore, 2018, Feiwel & Friends. The non-binary protagonist Page uses *she/her* and *he/him* pronouns.

Brooklyn, Burning - Steve Brezenoff, 2011, Carolrhoda Books. The main characters are ungendered throughout the whole book.

Can't Take That Away – Steven Salvatore, 2021, Bloomsbury YA. The genderqueer protagonist uses *he/him*, *she/her* and *they/them* pronouns.

Community of Magic Pens - E.D.E. Bell (Ed.), 2020, Atthis Arts, LLC. The protagonist Meena from the short story "Writink" (Ether Nepenthes) uses *they/them* pronouns and figurant B from the short story "Memory Malfunction" (Minerva Cerridwen) uses *they/them* pronouns.

Dalí - E.M. Hamill, 2017, NineStar Press. The genderfluid protagonist Dalí uses *they/them* pronouns.

Euphoria Kids - Alison Evans, 2020, Echo Publishing. The non-binary protagonist Iris uses *they/them* pronouns.

Even if We Break - Marieke Nijkamp, 2020, Sourcebooks Fire. One of the protagonists uses *they/them* pronouns. Translated into Dutch as *Zelfs als we zwijgen*.

Fine: a comic about gender - Rhea Ewing, 2022, Liveright. Different stories from transgender people.

Finna - Nino Cipri, 2020, Tor.com. The non-binary protagonist Jules uses *they/them* pronouns.

Infinity Son – Adam Silvera, 2020, Simon & Schuster. A minor side character Lore uses *they/them* pronouns.

It Goes Like This – Miel Moreland, 2021, Feiwel & Friends. One of the non-binary protagonists, Steph, uses *they/them* pronouns.

I Wish You All the Best – Manson Deaver, 2019, Push. The non-binary protagonist uses *they/them* pronouns.

Jamie - L.D. Lapinski, 2023, Hachette Children's Group. The non-binary main character Jamie uses *they/them* pronouns.

Just Bart – E.D.E. Bell, 2021, Atthis Arts, LLC. The protagonist uses *they/them* pronouns.

Legendborn – Tracy Deonn, 2020, Simon & Schuster Children's UK. The side character Greer uses *they/them* pronouns.

Love & Bubbles - Jaylee James (Ed.), 2018. A protagonist, Larimar, in "Summoned" (Minerva Cerridwen) uses *they/them* pronouns.

Loveless – Alice Oseman, 2020, HarperCollins Children's Books. Side character Sunil uses *he/him* and *they/them* pronouns. The text only uses *he/him* pronouns.

Magnus Chase series- Rick Riordan, 2015, Disney-Hyperion Books. One of the main characters', Alex Fierro, gender and pronouns change according to their mental state.

Mask of Shadows – Linsey Miller, 2017, Sourcebooks Fire. The genderfluid protagonist Sal uses *they/them* pronouns.

Meet Cute Diary - Emery Lee, 2021, Quill Tree Books. The love interest Drew uses *they/them* pronouns.

My shadow is Purple - Scott Stuart, 2022, Larrikin House US. Picture book about a non-binary kid, told from first person perspective.

Neon Horror: Queer Horror Anthology – multiple authors, 2020, The Haunted Bouncy Castle. Protagonist in the short story "The Lost" (L.S. Reinholt & Minerva Cerridwen) uses *they/them* pronouns.

Nine of Swords, Reversed - Xan West, 2018. The genderfluid protagonist Dev uses *xe/xym* pronouns.

Our Bloody Pearl – D.N. Bryn, 2018, Avos Publishing. The non-binary personage uses *they/them* pronouns.

Our Dark Duet – V.E. Schwab, 2017, Greenwillow Books. The side character Soro Flynn uses *they/them* pronouns.

Out of Salem - Hal Schrieve, 2019, Triangle Square. The genderqueer protagonist Z uses *they/them* pronouns.

Out of the Blue - Jason June, 2022, HarperTeen. The main character Crest uses *they/them* pronouns

Pet – Akwaeke Emezi, 2019, Faber & Faber. The side character Whisper uses *they/them* pronouns.

Phoenix Extravagant - Yoon Ha Lee, 2020, Solaris. The non-binary main character Gyeon Jebi uses *they/them* pronouns

River of Teeth - Sarah Gailey, 2017, Tom Doherty Associates. The non-binary protagonist uses *they/them* pronouns.

Secondhand Origin Stories – Lee Blauersouth, 2018, Createspace Independent Publishing Platform. The non-binary/genderqueer protagonist Yael uses *xe/xym* pronouns.

She Gets the Girl - Alyson Derrick & Rachael Lippincott, 2022, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers. The side character Kendall uses *they/them* pronouns.

Sing for the Coming of the Longest Night - Katherine Fabian and Iona Datt Sharma, 2018. The non-binary protagonist Nat uses *they/them* pronouns.

Strangeworlds Travel Agency - L.D. Lapinski, 2020, Orion Children's Books. The minor character Swype uses *they/them* pronouns. Translated into Dutch as *Reisbureau Wereldvreemd*.

Symptoms of Being Human - Jeff Garvin, 2016, Balzer + Bray. The main character is genderfluid, told through first perspective.

The Bruising of Qilwa – Naseem Jamnia, 2022, Tachyon Publications. The non-binary main character Firuz uses *they/them* pronouns. The younger brother of Fairuz is trans.

The Empress of Salt and Fortune - Nghi Vo, 2020, Tor.com. The non-binary protagonist Chih uses *they/them* pronouns. The other books in the Singing Hills Cycle by Nghi Vo also feature Chih.

The Lifeline Signal - RoAnna Sylvers, 2017, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. The non-binary protagonist Shiloh uses *xie/xir* pronouns.

The Light In Front of Me - Aria Morgan Howell, 2019. The non-binary protagonist (fox person) uses *they/them* pronouns.

The Many Half-Lived Lives of Sam Sylvester - Maya MacGregor, 2022, Astra Young Readers. The non-binary main character Sam Sylvester uses *they/them* pronouns

The Tiger's Watch - Julia Ember, 2017, Harmony Ink Press. The genderfluid protagonist Tashi uses *they/them* pronouns.

The Vela - Yoon Ha Lee, Becky Chambers, S.L. Huang, and Rivers Solomon, 2019, Serial Box. The non-binary protagonist Niko uses *they/them* pronouns.

The Voyages of Cinrak the Dapper - A.J. Fitzwater, 2020, Queen of Swords Press. A minor character uses *they/them* pronouns.

The Queen of Cups - Ren Basel, 2019, Independent. The non-binary main character Theo Marinos uses *they/them* pronouns

Trans-Galactic Bike Ride: Feminist Bicycle Science Fiction Stories of Transgender and Nonbinary Adventurers - Lydia Rogue (Ed.), 2020, Microcosm Publishing. Multiple minor characters in multiple short stories use *they/them* pronouns.

Unburied Fables – Creative Aces Publishing, 2016, Creative Aces Publishing. Protagonist the Beast in The short story “Handsome and the Beast” (Ether Nepenthes) uses *they/them* pronouns.

Water into Wine - Joyce Chng, 2017, Annorlunda Books. The non-binary protagonist Xin uses *they/them* pronouns.

Werecockroach - Polenth Blake, 2018. The agender protagonist uses *they/them* pronouns.

Written on the Body - Jeanette Winterson, 1992, Vintage International. The main character remains ungendered. Translated in Dutch as *Op het lichaam geschreven* by Gerrit de Blaauw.

X-gender - Asuka Miyazaki, 2022, Seven Seas. Autobiographical manga with *they/them* pronouns.