

## “I’m Glad *I* was Designed”: Un/Doing Gender and Class in Susan Price’s “Odin Trilogy”

Sanna Lehtonen

Published online: 24 February 2012

© The Author(s) 2012. This article is published with open access at Springerlink.com

**Abstract** Susan Price’s “Odin Trilogy” (2005–2008) is a juvenile science fiction series that depicts a future where class relations have become polarised due to late capitalist and technological developments and where ways of doing gender continue to be strongly connected with class. The society in the novels is based on slavery: people are either Freewomen/Freemen or bonders. Here wealth and genetic engineering regulate normative ways of doing gender and class and define borders between humanity and inhumanity. By drawing on recent feminist theory and queer theorisations of Butler (2004) and Halberstam (2005), I will examine gender and class as both material and performative aspects of identity that are “un/done” in relation to heteronormative life trajectories. I focus on the two female protagonists and their classic role reversal: one escapes slavery while the other is forced to become a bonder. The classic scenario becomes more complicated when the girls escape together to Mars and start a new life there as a queer couple. The girls’ “queer life trajectories” (Halberstam) challenge normative ways of doing gender and class and open up possibilities for reading Price’s trilogy as a critique of neoliberalist and postfeminist discourses of gender, class, identity and choice.

**Keywords** Gender · Social class · Feminist theory · Queer theory · Science fiction · Susan Price

---

Dr Sanna Lehtonen completed her joint PhD in English language and literature at the University of Jyväskylä and Macquarie University in 2010. She is currently a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg University, in a project called “Transformations of the Public Space” where she examines the reception of adult and children’s literature in social media. She is also finishing a book on girlhood, invisibility and age-shifting in children’s fantasy (forthcoming from McFarland).

---

S. Lehtonen (✉)  
Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg University, PO Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg,  
The Netherlands  
e-mail: s.j.lehtonen@uvt.nl

## Young Adult Science Fiction as Social Critique

In their study of children's and young adult fiction involving utopian elements, Clare Bradford et al. (2008, p. 6) apply the term “transformative utopianism” to suggest that “works of fiction employ utopian and dystopian themes and motifs in a way that has a transformative purpose: that is, they propose or imply new social and political arrangements by imagining transformed world orders.” This definition is useful because, first, it enables the discussion of utopian or dystopian narrative elements (such as themes or motifs) in texts that do not necessarily belong to the sub-genre of utopian fiction. Second, it suggests that transformative utopias offer solutions, not mere critiques of society. While it has been suggested that a good part of recent young adult novels with dystopian themes has a tendency to discern problems of contemporary society without offering alternative, hopeful visions of the future (see Mendlesohn, 2009, pp. 145–148; Reynolds, 2007, p. 154), Bradford et al. (2008, p. 185) conclude their study on a more positive note. They argue that contemporary utopian texts for children “generally refuse to give into despair and nihilism” and potentially encourage readers to “extrapolate from the world of the text to their actual social realities” and take action. Susan Price's “Odin Trilogy,” a science fiction series consisting of *Odin's Voice* (2005), *Odin's Queen* (2006), and *Odin's Son* (2008), offers these positive qualities, avoiding both cynicism and naïve optimism.

While set in the future, utopian literature in general addresses problems of the here and now (see Russ, 1981, p. 81; Bradford et al., 2008, p. 8). In the “Odin Trilogy,” the transformative purpose emerges particularly in arrangements of gender and social class and the novels include critiques of neoliberalist and postfeminist aspects of contemporary society. Price's novels portray a divided future society where, due to late capitalist and technological developments, freedom and human rights are only granted to a group of people whose wealth relies on the exploitation of others in the form of bondage. Social class is not only based on attributes such as wealth and education but becomes genetically embodied because access to genetic manipulation sets the wealthy, beautiful people apart from the poor, non-designed people. By showing, through different characters' points of view, how power operates in the fictional society, Price's texts criticise unequal power relations and offer visions of alternative ways of life—albeit these alternatives may also involve danger and instability.

I will examine gender and class as both material and performative aspects of identity that are “un/done” in relation to heteronormative life trajectories, relying on the queer theorisations of Judith Butler (2004) and Judith Halberstam (2005), as well as recent feminist discussions of gender and social class in relation to neoliberalism and postfeminism (e.g. Skeggs, 2005; McRobbie, 2009). I focus on the two female protagonists and main focalisers, Kylie, alias Odinstoy, the godspeaker for Odin, and Affroditey (Affie), who move in opposing directions in the class system: one escapes slavery while the other becomes a bonder after her family's financial breakdown. The classic role reversal becomes more complicated when the girls escape together to Mars and start a new life there as a queer couple. By adopting Halberstam's notion of “queer life trajectories,” I will argue that the

girls' escape places them in a queer time and space where one has more freedom in terms of non-normative identities but where one is not necessarily safe. I will also suggest that the most effective criticism of neoliberalist and postfeminist discourses is realised in the representation of individual agency in the trilogy.

### **Un/Doing Gender and Class: Normative and Queer Life Trajectories**

Current feminist and queer thinking that draws on Foucauldian social theory offers some useful concepts to examine the ways in which Price's novels extrapolate contemporary, late capitalist social structures, discourses and norms related to gender and class to a fictional society of the future. Foucault (2008, pp. 73–79) discusses contemporary society as a “disciplinary” or “panoptic” society where norms and regulations are imposed on people by various disciplinary institutions (including school, army, and medical institutions) and maintained through a threat of punishment and a sense of constant surveillance that lead people to monitor their own behaviour. As will be argued below, Price's novels describe how these disciplinary processes and this self-monitoring are realised in the treatment and behaviour of individual bonders. While regulating behaviour, disciplinary systems also aim at normalisation, that is, establishing “the division between normal and abnormal” (Foucault, 2008, p. 55) and associating normativity with normality. Deploying a Foucauldian view of subjectivity and normativity, Butler (2004, p. 1) defines gender as “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint,” the scene of constraint consisting of norms associated with gender. Butler suggests that normativity and normality are realised not only in the ways in which subjects both routinely and creatively “do” or perform their own identities but also in how a subject's identity can be “undone” by other people in the process of recognition. Positive recognition by others is necessary for a person to become a socially viable being. On the other hand, persons can be “undone” either by labelling them with identities that devalue them or do not correspond to their own sense of self, or by not recognising them as humans at all. Thus, for Butler (2004, p. 2), “recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced”; whether an individual is recognised as “human” or “less-than-human” or normal/abnormal is dependent on social norms.

Similar terms apply to social class as an identity category, performed within a scene of constraint consisting of norms regulating behaviour associated with a person's class status. Skeggs (2005), drawing on Bourdieu, maintains that class in contemporary society is not only based on unequally divided economic capital but also unequally divided cultural capital. Cultural capital consists of various cultural resources, and inequality arises from the fact that certain resources—such as those of fashion or education—are only available to members of certain social classes that can afford them. Furthermore, different resources bear different cultural value in terms of taste and respectability; attending a football match rather than a classical musical concert, for example, indicates more populist cultural values and class affiliations. Thus Skeggs (2005, pp. 972–973) suggests that cultural resources are used effectively in self-making, to construct a class identity based not only on wealth but on lifestyle choices. In the British society that Skeggs discusses, cultural resources and lifestyle choices

associated with the middle class are valued, or treated as normal and morally good. Moreover, middle-class standards form the norm against which the deviant, transgressive others are assigned as “immoral, repellent, abject, worthless, disgusting, even disposable” (Skeggs, 2005, p. 977). Halberstam (2005) also discusses the link between normativity and middle-class values but extends her notions to Western societies in general and to the whole life trajectory of a gendered and classed subject. (Hetero)normative life trajectories are, according to Halberstam (2005, p. 4), driven by “a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality”; one matures from an impulsive teenager into a responsible and respectable adult who aims for stability and safety, and will study, find a job, marry and have children in a pre-planned schedule. Any deviant choices are often judged as irresponsible or abnormal. Halberstam (2005, p. 6) suggests that people who do not follow normative life trajectories will end up living in “queer time,” a concept that she uses to suggest “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time.” Here the term “queer” not only refers to sexual or gender identity but may also indicate, for instance, working-class, homeless and/or unemployed people. I too will extend the use of “queer” to cover non-normative identities in terms of gender, sexuality and class.

Normative ways of doing identities can be challenged by transgressing the norms and choosing queer life trajectories. Furthermore, as Skeggs (2005, p. 976) suggests, “one of the most effective ways to deflect devaluing is to ignore it, to enjoy that for which you know you are being condemned”; that is, to embrace and value one’s queerness and thus fight those who are in authoritative positions and able to (de)value others. While these strategies—following a queer life trajectory and embracing one’s difference—may serve as ways to enhance notions of gender, sexuality and class, transgression may also be dangerous if one is recognised as less-than-human, deprived of societal rights and subjected to social or material punishments or cures. Non-normative behaviour should thus not be viewed simply as rebellious and subversive. Butler, Halberstam and Skeggs all provide a critique of a neoliberalist discourse of individual agency; that is, of seeing an individual as able to freely construct identity in creative ways.

A similar critique surfaces in Price’s novels. The “Odin Trilogy” makes the process of un/doing identities visible in its complex representation of gendered and classed identities that are queer and/or “undone” by others. The novels involve multiple focalisation and the omniscient narrator often offers glimpses of minor characters’ thoughts as well; thus the texts offer varying perspectives on the embodied performance of gender and class as well as on the social hierarchies in the fictional society. In the rest of this paper, I will discuss gender and class in Price’s novels by focusing on, first, Affie and consumer femininity, second, Odinstoy and the queer ways of doing gender and class, and, finally, on the critique of individual agency.

### **Dialogue with Postfeminism: Un/Doing Consumer Femininity**

While the obsession with one’s looks and the sense of continuous imperfection are what Smith (1990, p. 87) associates with the discourse of femininity in

contemporary Western society in general, Affie is the epitome of what Talbot (2010, p. 138) calls “consumer femininity.” Talbot (2010, p. 139) suggests that consumer femininity “enters into women’s daily lives in the material and visual resources that they draw upon to feminise themselves.” Here women can only maintain a beautiful, feminine appearance by becoming consumers of various goods, including clothes, cosmetics and beauty treatments. Consumer femininity is associated with neoliberalist and postfeminist discourses by feminist critics such as Cronin (2000), Gill (2008) and McRobbie (2009). While neoliberalist and postfeminist discourses of freedom of choice, agency and empowerment view individuals “as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating, and self-regulating” (Gill, 2008, p. 436), these feminist critics maintain that the agency and freedom of choice that “empowered” women have actually come with severe restrictions. Neoliberalist discourses of advertising suggest that it is possible to “just do yourself” and thus perform one’s “unique” identity (Cronin, 2000, p. 279) but, as McRobbie (2009, p. 19) writes, in a lifestyle culture, choice is “a modality of constraint. The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices.” However, choices are fairly limited if one wants to be recognised as a responsible—or fashionable—subject. These notions have clear connections to both Halberstam’s “normative life trajectories” as well as Butler’s and Skeggs’s notions of the differently valued identities and cultural resources. If one does not make the right, responsible choices, one might end up living in “queer time” and be deemed as less worthy, or less-than-human. In the “Odin Trilogy,” consumer femininity and the neoliberalist and postfeminist discourses of choice and agency associated with it are criticised but, in the end, Affie’s consumerist knowledge also proves to be an asset in the fight for the abolition of bondage.

At the beginning, Affie is securely following a normative life trajectory. She is beautiful and wealthy, enjoys consuming, and the only risky factor in her life is that her marriage has not yet been arranged. The lives of the supposedly “free” Freepeople are strictly regulated. Everything is pre-planned and scheduled, including education, marriage, even sex: teenagers are allowed to have sex in “consent parlours,” granted that they fill in forms of consent and are informed about contraceptives. Naturally, it is also important to design one’s children, since the technologies enable it. Affie is a product of the system and at first it seems that she is merely a superficial girl whose identity is based on her appearance:

“Do you think I should have my hair redone?” She could see herself in the mirror: a lovely, big-eyed girl with skin the colour of dark toffee, and thick, waving, light brown hair that fluoresced because of her jellyfish genes. Or was it squid genes? Whichever. As her mood changed, or her temperature did, her hair sparkled with glowing cloud patterns of blue, pink or green. “I’m glad *I* was designed.” Her parents, like any good, responsible parents, had gone to a designer and had their genes read, to choose the best possible baby they could have. And then they’d had the genes tweaked a little here and there, to improve even on the best. (Price, 2005, pp. 39–40)

In Affie’s world, it is the *responsible* parents’ task to *choose* “the best possible baby they could have”—the references to responsibility and choice suggesting that the

parents are “free” to choose but since everything should be responsibly planned and controlled, their offspring must be genetically designed. Social class, or wealth, thus becomes inscribed into people’s genes and can be read from their faces: beauty is valued because it reflects a wealthy social position. Affie has internalised these ideas: she is proud to be designed—assuming that this also makes her a better person—and abhors the thought of not designing children. To leave things to chance is irresponsible because the results are unpredictable: “You might get a clever turnip or a pretty pig, by accident” (Price, 2005, p. 36). All of this is indicative of Halberstam’s notion of bourgeois normative life trajectories. Choices are limited by what is fashionable (looks), what is respectable (organised marriage), what is responsible (the qualities of one’s children); in sum, by what is considered “right” among the wealthy Freepeople. Thus few choices are actually available unless one wants to depart from the normative life trajectory and face the potential risks.

Ironically, as the result of her parents’ choices, Affie herself is little more than a designed product. While Affie thinks she is “unique,” her friend views her as an extreme example of a fashion victim: “In a few years, people will be able to date you by your looks” (Price, 2005, p. 40). This remark hurts Affie since she views her special looks as her greatest asset. Affie is free only in the sense that she can focus on taking care of her looks; although she has the perfect genes granting her a perfect body, in the consumerist society of the novels she is never finished because fashions change and people age, hence the constant need to keep up with the trends and to invest in rejuvenation treatments. Affie’s individual agency is realised in her performance of consumer femininity in the fields of beauty and indoor design. As Mendlesohn (2009, p. 122) notes, Affie “has no training for anything other than being a very expensive wife” and, in the passages focalised through Affie, it becomes clear that she has little ambition for anything else. All of this changes, however, when Affie becomes a bonder, one of the people that she despises for being poor and undesigned.

While it might seem that Affie’s embodied femininity cannot be easily undone because it is not only about her behaviour but inscribed in her genes, this is exactly what happens after Affie’s father goes bankrupt, kills himself and Affie is bonded as a result of her father borrowing money against her. In a Foucauldian process of discipline and punishment, Affie’s identity as a beautiful, rich girl is undone and she is forced to obediently perform her new bonder identity. When Affie is taken to the training centre for bonders, she is stripped of all her possessions, including her underwear, her genetically designed hair, and her name; none of these is considered suitable for bonders. As the property of a bonding agency, she is valued in new terms: her greatest asset, beauty, is of no value in her position as a servant and since she has no practical skills, she has little worth. Affie opposes the attempts to undo her identity because it is a humiliating process: “It was as if they were trying to turn her into someone else” (Price, 2005, p. 83). However, she is tamed by physical violence and solitary confinement, and forced to turn into someone else since no one recognises her previous identity. Fear and a sense of insecurity make Affie obedient:

She realised that she had no defence and no appeal. That she had no choices anymore – that if she didn’t do as she was told, she would be made to obey,

and nobody pitied her, or thought it unjust, or cared at all. This was shattering to her.... She was meek and docile – indeed, meek and trembling – as she was issued with her kit: a change of clothing, sheets, a blanket, a towel, toothbrush and paste. (Price, 2005, p. 95)

Part of her shock comes with the realisation that people are not simply born bonders but are forced into this position by others in a violent process where one is stripped of one's freedom and value as a human. Moreover, this is viewed as just and acceptable. The only worth that bonders have is based on the work that they are able to do. Affie sees the other bonders as "docile" (Price, 2005, p. 99), using a term resonant of Foucault's phrase "docile bodies" (1979, p. 138) that describes the products of disciplinary power: subjects that are disciplined and controlled through punishment and their constant visibility. In the panoptic society of Price's novels, constant visibility is achieved by injecting an implant, a tracer transmitter that includes an ID tag, into a bonder's bottom, as well as by placing surveillance cameras everywhere, including private homes. This leads to Affie monitoring her own behaviour, since even though no one is behind the cameras and computers all the time, "[y]ou never knew when she [Freewoman Perry, Affie's owner] might be listening, because there were web cams and mikes everywhere, even in the garden, connected to the house computer" (Price, 2005, p. 157). The surveillance ensures that bonders internalise acceptable forms of behaviour, knowing that their movements can always be detected. Thus Affie meekly goes through the training that teaches her to address Freepeople respectfully and to obey unthinkingly. Being disciplined is difficult since Affie has to focus consciously on doing her new identity, "arranging her face into pleasant, willing expressions; running over every word in her mind before she spoke it; concentrating on being good, all the time. It was exhausting" (Price, 2005, p. 87). Even though Affie has been made into a bonder by others, the identity work is not complete without her repeatedly performing the gestures, acts and speech associated with her new status.

Affie's former life trajectory, of being a normal wealthy girl, has changed; but her new trajectory is not a particularly queer one as this is what is considered the norm for a bonder. Rather than breaching any norms, then, she realises that this is exactly what she will not be able to do as a bonder, as there is little chance of escaping. Although she is encouraged at the bonding agency to "[w]ork hard, and you may be able to buy yourself out" (Price, 2005, p. 81), this is not a real possibility for Affie because her owner does not allow her to do extra jobs. In the spirit of neoliberalist discourses of agency, bondage is introduced as a choice: there is a way out if one works hard enough but, if one does not choose to do this, it is due to one's own laziness. In actuality, however, there is little choice. So, even though Affie has been treated as a piece of property in her free life, to be bonded and treated violently is worse because she has now become less-than-human. While she might be considered fortunate—there are also "miserable sweat-shop factories, where the bonders slept in cold dormitories and caught TB and died in a year" (Price, 2005, pp. 124–125)—her treatment at Freewoman Perry's house is appalling. Affie is forced to realise that her earlier consumer femininity—experiencing an idle life at beauty parlours—was possible only because bonders had been doing all the actual

work; in her new position, she is the bonder that makes it possible for Freewoman Perry to perform her own consumer femininity.

Soon Affie is doing her new identity successfully, but in her mind she hates her new life and never forgets her earlier identity. Even though her ugly clothes and shaved head mean that “[n]o one would ever have guessed that she was designed, and very beautiful” (Price, 2005, pp. 115–116), Affie views herself as a princess in drag. Her position is typical of the stories of “class cross-dressers” that disguise their “true” identities in an appearance associated with a different class. This view—that Affie strongly holds—means that one’s true identity would remain stable even when performing other identities. Thus, when Odinstoy recognises Affie as a unique human, as “Affie, not a mere bonder,” promising her that “[t]here is love for you” (Price, 2005, p. 127), just as Odinstoy promises all to whom she preaches her message of love and equality, Affie becomes one of her followers. She helps Odinstoy kidnap her owner’s adopted son, who is actually Odinstoy’s own progeny, given birth and nursed by her, and the three of them escape to Mars as a family. Whether Affie is motivated by the promise of freedom or her love for Odinstoy, the arrival on Mars seems to mark a new, queer start for Affie.

However, at the beginning of *Odin’s Queen*, when the girls have reached Mars and Affie is free again, she thinks only of how to start doing her consumer femininity again, dreaming of becoming a clothes designer. She is unhappy in her queer position, pretending to be the wife of a cross-dressing female godspeaker. It seems that Affie’s feminine class identity is indeed fixed and that she has learned little from her experiences as a bonder. She is, for instance, willing to purchase a personal bonder and finds that “nothing made you feel richer and freer than viewing other people with the intention of buying them” (Price, 2006, p. 125). When given the chance, Affie regains her old gendered and classed identity, based on vanity and the exploitation of others. While Odinstoy is more interested in her duties as a godspeaker than earning money, Affie’s vanity and desire to leave her queer position lead to disaster when a man hired by the Church of Mars (the dominant church that holds political and economic power there and views Odinstoy as a threat) takes Affie on a shopping spree and bribes her with a promise of marriage. Affie is eager to accept—a natural step in the normative life trajectory for rich women—and thoughtlessly reveals her criminal past with Odinstoy. This leads to their public exposure on a TV show, after which Odinstoy, believing that her god has abandoned her, kills herself. Affie’s seemingly unchangeable identity, based on consumer femininity, seems to have caused her to make choices that lead to destruction.

Yet, in the “Odin Trilogy” it is shown that change is possible and people’s life trajectories are not determined by genes and social background. After Odinstoy’s death, Affie’s sense of guilt enables her to shake off her earlier identities, both as an expensive product and as a bonded property, and to develop a different form of agency, linked with other people. Affie works for the Temple of Mars (Odin’s temple) and shows great skill in marketing and organising things; she makes herself useful as necessary, knowing that she is on parole for crimes committed on Earth and only remains on Mars because of the help she has received from Odinstoy’s followers. Affie has also experienced an awakening in regard to bondage:

Remembering her own ignorance and stupidity gave her a pain like stomach ache and she wanted to curl up, hide under the stair. She'd fought so hard against accepting the simple, staring truth that bonders were exactly the same as free people, except for the fact that free people had taken away their freedom.

She hadn't wanted to believe it. If it was true, then she wasn't superior in her very essence, not made of finer stuff in a better mould. No: if it was true, then she was just the same as the least-regarded bonder. Indeed, she would be inferior to many bonders, since she didn't have their knowledge or skills. (Price, 2008, pp. 39–40)

Affie's realisation is that one's social status is not inscribed in the genes, but based on the power structures of society; in other words, being designed did not make one a better person; genetic manipulation had not improved her as a *moral* subject. Finally enlightened by her own experiences and Odinstoy's consciousness-raising, Affie concludes that nothing justifies bondage and that "[h]er parents had been wrong. The society she'd grown up in had been wrong" (Price, 2008, p. 41). Affie's "own ignorance and stupidity" do not completely explain her scorn for bonders; rather, she has adopted the cultural values of the social class that she has been born into. Yet after her awakening, Affie does not change completely but continues to build her new identity in terms of consumerism: she still focuses on her beautiful appearance, lives in a nice house surrounded by nice things and makes herself useful by marketing tacky Odinstoy souvenirs to raise money for the temple. Nevertheless, the main difference lies in her agency; she no longer focuses solely on herself but uses her consumerist skills for a common cause. While criticising the narcissism of consumer femininity, the trilogy here presents a more complex consumerist identity that is based not only on individualism but also altruism.

### Queer Play with Class and Gender

In many ways, Kylie, a bonder girl who becomes Odinstoy, a godspeaker for Odin, is the complete opposite of Affie. Kylie is poor, odd-looking and only trained for household work. From her birth, she has been a submissive bonder; her life has been characterised by work and abuse from people who hold the belief that "some people are suited to it [bondage], they're happier that way" (Price, 2005, p. 205). Kylie is not happy in her position, however, and when she finds her calling as a godspeaker, she readily escapes bondage. Yet, like Affie, who maintains her consumer femininity to a certain extent during and after her experiences as a bonder, Odinstoy maintains her identity as a bonder even as a godspeaker. As her name indicates, she is only a servant of her god, and, moreover, she emphasises her own experiences as a bonder when preaching for the abolition of bondage. However, Odinstoy is a more contradictory character than Affie, not only in terms of gender but also in terms of what she preaches and how she behaves.

Odinstoy performs several, contrasting identities after she is freed from bondage and starts following a queer life trajectory as a godspeaker. A group of followers of

Odin recognises Kylie as a godspeaker—her divinations seem to come true—and buys her bond, sets her free and employs her at the temple of Odin, thus supporting Kylie's performance of her new identity as Odinstoy. As a godspeaker, Odinstoy is entitled to engage in non-normative behaviour. Yet religious leaders also have a lot of power, as religion is shown to play an important role both on Earth and Mars; thus Odinstoy's actions disturb and threaten many people who try to undo her identity. Some people at the temple of Odin are offended because female bonders claiming to speak for Odin are inappropriate: "It brought them into disrespect, they said, with gatherings at other temples" (Price, 2005, p. 18). The critics' claims hold some truth, since many people from other temples do view Odinstoy as lacking respectability and, therefore, as a threat to the authorities. Zeuslove, the leader of the Church of Mars, views a bonder speaking for Odin, let alone a woman married to a woman, as a "freakish pervert" (Price, 2006, p. 22). In his view, Mars needs "clear guidance, clear rules, firm boundaries" (Price, 2006, p. 23); that is, well-established norms to maintain a social order that keeps Zeuslove and other wealthy people at the top of the hierarchy. The queerly behaving Odinstoy is thus a threat to the established order.

For Odinstoy, cross-dressing is a way for her to play the role of godspeaker. After being freed from the bonder's outfit, Odinstoy appears both as a chic lady and a cross-dressing priestess speaking for Odin, who was himself able to shapeshift and change sex. People are puzzled about Odinstoy's gender identity since, despite her outfit, involving men's clothes and a moustache, most do not mistake her for a man but recognise her as a cross-dressing woman. Odinstoy herself accounts for her cross-dressing in terms of tradition since, in the Eddas, the priestesses of Odin sometimes cross-dressed (Price, 2005, p. 135). She also declares that she lives as a man because she speaks for all (Price, 2006, p. 19). As a cross-dressing godspeaker and a freed bonder, then, Odinstoy claims to represent people of all genders and social classes. However, although Odinstoy's cross-dressing is an identity choice with political consequences, it also has a sexual dimension, for it is suggested that some men become interested in her exactly because she dresses as a man. As her greatest opponent, Zeuslove, puts it:

There was the appeal to the sex-instinct: always dangerous when it overruled reason. The young and inexperienced were always at risk of being overwhelmed by it. Odinstoy's boyish appearance in her boy's clothes was a deliberate ploy to widen her appeal. (Price, 2006, p. 86)

It is clear, then, that Zeuslove's main concern is with maintaining his own position by keeping the younger generation out of contact with queer people and religions that might inspire them to criticise the authorities.

Zeuslove's fears about Odinstoy's appeal are not unfounded, since not only men but also some women feel attracted to and are influenced by the godspeaker. Odinstoy's transgressive construction of gender is not limited to cross-dressing for she also challenges heteronormativity through her queer relationship with Affie. In passages focalised through Affie, her love for Odinstoy can be interpreted as expressing a lesbian desire, even though Affie herself does not recognise it as such:

It was like being in love – but more than love, because she'd never felt so deeply and wildly for Neppie or any other boy ... it wasn't as if she wanted to sex with Odinstoy [sic] – she never thought about her like that at all. Never. Surely that was crazy? To be so obsessed with someone, and it wasn't even about sex? (Price, 2005, p. 162)

While it is possible that Affie is in love with Odinstoy because Odinstoy is the only person who genuinely cares for her and recognises her as a human, not as a bonder, the above passage suggests that Affie is experiencing a desire that is deeper and wilder than her earlier experiences of heterosexual desire. It seems that Affie is unable to recognise her own queer desire because, in the heteronormative world that she has been brought up in, such a thing does not exist: wealthy, designed girls are only trained to be good wives for rich men, and, furthermore, love is inherently associated with sex. For Affie, her relationship with Odinstoy is formative because it changes her notions of love and desire, helps her to rethink her own identity, and, in the end, makes her reconsider her views on society. Her love for Odinstoy also leads her to direct action. By participating in criminal activities (kidnap) and pretending to be Odinstoy's wife to escape Earth, Affie has also entered queer time.

The queer family's new identities are finalised when they escape surveillance with the help of Odinstoy's followers; namely, a computer-savvy friend who creates false identification records for them, and a doctor, one of Odinstoy's lovers, who removes their trace transmitters. New names and past histories are invented for Odinstoy and her family, consisting of her wife, Affie, and their (kidnapped) child, Odinsgift, who is introduced as “the bio-engineered child of them both” (Price, 2006, p. 14). While Odinstoy has been following a queer life trajectory since her appointment at the temple, the escape is the start of a queer life for Affie and Odinsgift—albeit Affie tries to abandon her queer position. As regards the child, it is later revealed that Odinsgift is part of a genetic engineering experiment where *Homo neanderthalensis* has been brought to life by extracting DNA from ancient bones, inserting it into human eggs and sperm and placing the artificially fertilised eggs in the wombs of surrogate mothers, Odinstoy among them. This revelation suggests that a normative life trajectory would never have been possible for Odinsgift because of his genetic inheritance, which sets limits, for instance, to the development of language skills. Despite their exceptionality, including Odinstoy's refusal to purchase a personal bonder, the queer family are accepted as members of the community that worships Norse deities in the independent canton of Osbourne, which opposes the beliefs and power of the Church of Mars. Ironically, even supporters of the majority religion are enthusiastic about the queer family when it suits their purposes. When interviewed for Martian television, the presenter is excited to hear about the marriage, since it fits the conservative, normative views of the respectable citizens: “Marriage, commitment, children, passing on the heritage—that's what we like!” (Price, 2006, p. 50). While this is an attempt to try to interpret the queer family from a normative perspective, it is also clear that these *are* values that Odinstoy shares, even though “heritage” in her case means something radically different from the heritage of the majority. Odinstoy does not intend to stay on the margins but wants to create new values to be passed on to

future generations. Whereas Affie's greatest concern is with becoming rich (and married), Odinstoy's main mission is to preach equality and the abolition of bondage.

Whether Odinstoy believes she is acting on Odin's wishes or is merely manipulating people for her own goals, in terms of her social power, it is crucial that her followers recognise her as a godspeaker. She is a queer subject, yet in a socially powerful position. It is never entirely clear whether the events and divinations associated with Odin are of supernatural origin or mere coincidences which Odinstoy uses to manipulate people. When preaching, Odinstoy speaks without planning, as if in a trance (Price, 2005, p. 17), and she believes that the inner voice, or "such half-understood compulsions" that she experiences, are "the voice of the God" (Price, 2005, p. 151). Certainly, the voice might be that of a god but could also be interpreted as the inner voice of moral conscience. Furthermore, in other instances Odinstoy spends time secretly observing people at the temple through surveillance cameras and obtains information about people's backgrounds through electronic databases. Her divinations are therefore partly based on intelligence work, as well as on her knowledge of people's behaviour; as a bonder she has been forced to become very skilful at detecting other people's moods and wishes. Odinstoy therefore does everything to strengthen her powerful position as a charismatic leader, an authority who can define values for her (religious) community.

Odinstoy's leadership is controversial, however, because her behaviour is not only a threat to her enemies but frequently frightens her friends. Sometimes Odinstoy offers sex, love or friendship for people whose services or help she needs, but in other instances she uses violent forms of agency to threaten people, including her wife, Affie. In several passages focalised through Odinstoy, she is the one devaluing people because of their behaviour and her scorn for others often results in verbal or physical violence. In one instance, Odinstoy physically attacks Thorsgift, a young Martian man, mocking him for his supposedly civilised beliefs that allow the sexual abuse of bonders: "Don't tell me you've never shagged a bonder. Don't tell me your dad hasn't. That's what they're for" (Price, 2005, p. 205). Odinstoy's rage is based on her own experiences of abuse as well as on the knowledge that Freepeople view the abuse as justified. While admitting that the accusations are correct, Thorsgift himself thinks that he is "a nice guy" who has not really paid any attention to "all those faceless, well-nigh invisible bonders who had cooked his meals, tidied his room, cleaned his clothes, and generally made his life smooth and comfortable" (Price, 2005, p. 205), but has accepted this as the natural order of things. Odinstoy knows that free people are not born with their prejudiced views—she knows that children adopt these views in boarding schools (Price, 2005, p. 11)—yet she despises them for circulating beliefs that justify the abuse of other people. Her escape into queer time has not freed her from her past experiences, which may explain, if not justify, her violent behaviour. Furthermore, she uses her life trajectory as an example that all bonders should follow: she was born a slave but has gained her freedom. Odinstoy's mission is to give voice to "all those well-nigh invisible bonders" and thus she constantly reminds people of her queer life trajectory because it exposes the structural inequalities in society.

Odinstoy's final accomplishment is another identity change when she, during a gathering at the temple, declares herself to be Mother Mars, the wife of Odin:

Odinstoy pulled apart the long robe she wore, and it fell to the ground, leaving her naked.

There was a brief, sharp outcry from the gathering; and a rustling and shuffling, of many people moving at once, turning to each other, pointing – then silence again.

From the naked woman came a man's voice. "This is my queen, my love, my chosen one. She and I shall be one, Sky and Mars. Come to the wedding! Come you all and witness my promise – that I shall love her and guard her, and all of you, all of her children, shall be in our care, shall flourish, shall grow strong –" (Price, 2006, p. 159)

Odinstoy abandons her earlier identity as a cross-dressing priestess and appears naked, as if in her most natural form, as a new goddess. However, while Odinstoy herself believes in what she is doing, this is also a way to make people accept her political aims. During her speech, Odinstoy tells the people to worship a native goddess (herself) rather than any Earth deities, thus aspiring to the position not only of religious leader but of political leader as well. Despite her unsettling performance (or due to it), her message will be accepted, not merely because the message of love and protection appeals to people in general but also because many Martians see a new Martian goddess as a chance to advocate the independence of Mars from Earth. This is not appreciated by the authorities at the Church of Mars, for whom an individual leading a queer life trajectory could be dangerous: not only might she be seen as abnormal but also as subversive of the normative order, given that a growing number of followers were coming to share her values.

While Odinstoy's agency appears problematic, since she shifts between peaceful and violent behaviour, it is through her identity play that she is seen to be capable of challenging normative views of gendered and classed identities. Yet one might ask whether her strategies will lead to any real change in normative systems or merely attract either awe and admiration or fear and disgust in other people. As Halberstam (2005) demonstrates in her study, transgender people are often not celebrated as radical gender transgressors but punished in one way or other for their non-normative behaviour. Odinstoy is not, strictly speaking, a transgender character, since her gender identity is based on her continual flexibility: sometimes she appears as a woman, sometimes as a man. Her transgressive behaviour is partly accepted because of her exceptional role as a godspeaker, yet even Odinstoy herself has never believed that anything else but tragedy awaits those who follow Odin and transgress norms: "She'd always known that Odin would, one day, desert her .... When you accepted Odin's inspiration, that was the deal you made" (Price, 2006, p. 225).

This is a pessimistic end to Odinstoy's story, since the death of a gender-blending character suggests that the fictional society has not in any way changed its normative views of gender and sexuality. However, Price's books also demonstrate what can happen to the image of a transgressive person after her death, exposing how normative ways of doing gender and class operate in society. Odinstoy serves as an example of the ways in which people tend to interpret—or do

and undo—others' identities for their own purposes; thus a deviant, queer figure needs to be explained in terms that reflect the normative majority's value systems. The images of Odinstoy after her death are ironic: the contradictory, passionate and violent queer godspeaker has been turned into a benevolent Mother Mars—reminiscent of Our Lady in Catholic Christianity—appearing in statues, tacky souvenirs and on video screens at the temple. Some of the videos of her Mother Mars performance have also been digitally manipulated to give naked Odinstoy respectability through the addition of a piece of clothing, “in deference to tourists” (Price, 2008, p. 46). These images are not spread by Odinstoy's enemies but by the people who have been closest to her; moreover, they are not exactly lies, since they respect certain aspects of Odinstoy's identity, carefully selected to give her a sympathetic, posthumous persona. While people at the temple of Mars want to paint a particular portrait of Odinstoy to be able to spread her message of love as widely as possible, this is also a great marketing venture to raise money for the temple and the movement for the abolition of bondage. These are not just religious but political aims. Ironically, the image created by others of Odinstoy is effective: more and more people come to the temple and, at the end of the trilogy, it seems that bondage might be abolished in the canton of Osbourne precisely because of the political activism of the people at the temple, partly financed by selling Odinstoy souvenirs. This seems paradoxical, yet the novels seem to suggest that the only way to change society is to work the change by applying the rules of society to one's own ends—as is done here with consumerism. As regards gender, it is difficult to say whether Odinstoy is able to have a more permanent effect on society; but, as regards bondage and social class, she clearly is an agent of change. Lastly, in their critique of agency, the novels highlight the social constraints on “doing” any identities, whether in terms of social class, gender, or sexuality.

### **“Odin was a Joker!”—Choices, Coincidences and the Critique of Agency**

While both Affie and Odinstoy actively work toward their goals, their success is dependent both on themselves and others and, at several points, on twists of fate, such as the random malfunction of a surveillance system as they are about to leave Earth. The novels effectively demonstrate how an individual's freedom of choice is limited by laws and norms; forms of agency that are undesirable from the perspective of the authorities can be stigmatised or even criminalised. Neoliberalist and postfeminist discourses that emphasise the responsibility and freedom of each individual are most strongly questioned in the novels by challenging the notions of free choice and agency. Instead of simply celebrating individual agency and subjectivity or pessimistically suggesting that no one has real agency since everything is determined by social structures, Price's trilogy shows that one's life trajectory is neither the simple outcome of one's personal choices nor of one's embodied social identity (based on genes and socialisation). Rather, it is the product of both, an outcome of choice and chance combined. Moreover, the trilogy emphasises that one's trajectory is never just a personal thing: survival depends on intersubjective agency.

In the trilogy, purposeful agency is based on knowledge: to be able to be more than a mere piece of a machine one needs to know—or become conscious of—the machine and its design. However, even if one acts upon knowledge, this does not necessarily mean that one will profit. In the novels, Odin, “the god who gave mankind its thirst for knowledge and discovery” (Price, 2008, p. 48), becomes a symbol for the double-edged nature of knowledge. To follow Odin and obtain knowledge has uncertain consequences:

[Odin] knew that knowledge is power. So highly did He value learning and understanding that He paid the price asked for a single drink from the well that springs at the roots of the World Tree, and grants all that Tree's wisdom. The price was His right eye, and He thought it a fair price.

[...]

Those who dedicated themselves to Odin and accepted his gifts, had first to embrace His treachery; to learn to love uncertainty and chance and change; to take what He gave wholeheartedly, with joy; and to accept as willingly, the pain and grief and loss that, inevitably, followed – to accept the pain of the gouged out eye. (Price, 2005, pp. 22–23)

This attitude applies to human knowledge and science in general. However, Price's novels are neither overly optimistic nor technophobic. For instance, while genetic engineering is partly presented as vain, the group of *Homo neanderthalensis* are portrayed as amazing examples of what technology can enable. The ubiquitous surveillance technologies are threatening, yet those who have the knowledge can exploit them for their own benefit, as Odinstoy and Affie do. However, Odin's followers also consist of those queer subjects who, to be true to themselves—that is, to know themselves—choose to defy norms and pursue queer life trajectories, which can mean a life characterised by uncertainty. As Butler (2004, p. 3) suggests, to be able to lead a viable life, one may have to step outside the norms, since, “if I have no desire to be recognized within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred.” Even if this means social estrangement, it is better than to be recognised as something that one is not. “The pain of the gouged out eye” is the pain paid for knowledge that one does not fit into normative identity categories; hence a queer identity will often be interpreted as “deformed” in contrast to “natural” normative identities, and subjects recognised as deformed risk the chance of becoming targets of either cures or punishments. As Butler maintains, who we are is not merely a personal choice, nor is the “choice” to “be oneself” a simple, riskless option for everyone. Yet, in the “Odin Trilogy” (as for Butler) the solution is not to follow norms and avoid the risks—and thus deny one's difference—but, instead, to fight for greater acceptance and recognition of all persons as human.

In addition to the critique of freedom of choice, intersubjective agency is portrayed as necessary particularly at the end of the trilogy. After Odinstoy's death Affie becomes a central figure in the movement for the abolition of bondage and her later achievements result from political agency based on co-operation with others. When she is criticised for not respecting bond-holders and their right to their property, Affie replies by criticising the society that allows slavery:

“It’s true that, on Earth, people believe that they can own another person,” Affie said, with that enviable quickness of tongue. “It’s true that some people here on Mars believe that too. But many of us in Osbourne and the other Aesir cantons know that all people are free. To say that my stepdaughter is bonded is a nonsense. It’s meaningless.”

“Even if the law says it’s so?”

“A law based on nonsense is ridiculous, or wicked,” Affie said. “Or both. To obey such a law is ridiculous – and wicked.”

“Are you encouraging people to break the law?”

“I hope,” Affie said, “that in the very near future there won’t be any such law to break. In Osbourne, at least.” (Price, 2008, p. 239)

While Affie here speaks from a queer position, with regard to the laws and norms of the Martian society, she represents a whole group of people. As Affie points out, laws always reflect the beliefs and values of certain groups and times—they are not “natural” but can be changed if enough people are opposed to them. Affie effectively uses a discourse similar to the authorities to justify her own values and to undo the authorities as just, sensible and good; those who think differently from her are the ones seen to have “meaningless,” “ridiculous” and “wicked” laws. Affie herself has been breaking laws in the past to gain her freedom, but her case demonstrates that individual agency will only take one so far; political agency, in contrast, has to be jointly negotiated. To be able to change society, the rules will have to be changed, but to attain this in the first place, people will have to believe that there is a need for a change, thus the need for consciousness-raising that Odinstoy has been promoting in her sermons and Affie is doing in the above example. The point here is not to disobey the rules of society or to escape and live in the dangerous margins; rather, the point is to change the rules and so be recognised as a human being inside society, even if one is *not* the same as everyone else. In its portrayal of political action, then, the “Odin Trilogy” emphasises intersubjective agency and thus challenges the individualism promoted in neoliberalist and postfeminist discourses.

Despite the optimistic tone at the end, readers never learn the outcome of the vote; that is, whether the political action results in the abolition of bondage. This is in line with the other examples in the novels that show that while purposeful agency is certainly possible it is impossible to predict whether the outcome will be as desired. This, of course, does not erase one’s responsibility for one’s actions, nor does it imply that one should take no action at all. To act is a *moral* responsibility for persons who have the knowledge—and thus the power—to make society a better place not only for themselves but for everyone. In the trilogy, knowledge is certainly power and those who want to affect the future of the human species and human societies should strive for it.

## Conclusion

Price’s trilogy offers a social commentary on questions of identity and power. It clearly advocates taking a moral stance but without itself appearing to preach in a

moralistic tone. If one accepts Mendlesohn's (2009, pp. 133–134) argument that the portrayal of gender in young adult science fiction tends to be conservative and never as complex and diverse as in adult (especially feminist) science fiction, Price's novels must be treated as exceptions to this tendency (as Mendlesohn herself [p. 121] treats them). The "Odin Trilogy" provides an intricate depiction of identity formation in both normative and non-normative subjects. Thus the novels do not merely open up possibilities for queer and feminist readings but they themselves engage in queer and feminist critique.

In the "Odin Trilogy," bondage and genetically altered bodies are plausible extrapolations of what is happening in contemporary society in terms of gender and social class. According to the United Nations (2008), modern slavery concerns millions of people and takes such forms as human trafficking and forced and bonded labour. Like the "invisible" bonders in the "Odin Trilogy," these people are not recognised as humans by those who exploit them and rarely become visible to an average Western consumer. The average Western consumer might, in fact, be more interested in her own body and appearance; as Bordo (2003, p. xvii) notes in her study of body image and eating disorders, the technologies to mould bodies are getting ever more sophisticated and cosmetic surgeries in the United States are becoming exponentially more common. Since 2003, numbers have increased not only in the USA (American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2010) but also elsewhere (British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons, 2011). Significantly, Bordo (2003, p. xviii) writes that the ubiquitous, digitally enhanced images of perfect, lean bodies are "Training our perception in what's a defect and what is normal," thus changing what people view as natural. One might add that the media images, by omission, also define who exists: who is seen and recognised as a human. In the society of the future that Price describes, as well as in the here and now, some people are "doing" their identities by manipulating their bodies with the help of expensive technologies, while other people's identities are undone by their exploiters in worlds that never appear in the popular media. Whereas the first group desires to be seen and recognised as beautiful, the issue for the latter group is that they are not seen or recognised at all.

Problems around consumerist societies and criticism of neoliberalist forms of individual agency are not unusual themes in recent young adult fiction; indeed, Price herself has addressed similar issues in her earlier science fiction. The "Odin Trilogy" is not as optimistic about individual agency as Price's *Coming Down to Earth* (1994), nor is it as pessimistic about the future of a consumerist, colonialist society as *The Sterkarm Handshake* (1998) or *A Sterkarm Kiss* (2003). The "Odin Trilogy," in its transformative utopianism, presents a complex view of how individual agency can be realised in a society that regulates and oversees the behaviour of individuals. At the end, although societal problems are left unresolved, political, intersubjective agency is presented as a possible solution. The path from consciousness-raising to treating one's own individual choices as political and finally aiming for larger societal changes through democratic political action may sound boringly old-fashioned. Nevertheless, at a moment when young people are bombarded by messages in old and new media that, on the one hand, tell them that the most important thing in life is the way they look and, on the other hand, suggest

that hate speech that categorises other people as less-than-human should be allowed in the name of freedom of speech, stories that encourage a younger generation to become interested in societal issues and to engage in political action based on peaceful, democratic solutions might be more needed than ever.

**Open Access** This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits any use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and the source are credited.

## References

- American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. (2010). Demand for Plastic Surgery Rebounds by Almost 9%. Accessed August 11, 2011, from <http://www.surgery.org/media/news-releases/demand-for-plastic-surgery-rebounds-by-almost-9%25>.
- Bordo, Susan. (2003). *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (10th ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bradford, Clare, Mallan, Kerry, Stephens, John, and McCallum, Robyn. (2008). *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons. (2011). Moobs and Boobs: Double DD'igit Rise. Accessed August 11, 2011, from <http://www.baaps.org.uk/about-us/press-releases/855-moobs-and-boobs-double-ddigit-rise>.
- Butler, Judith. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Cronin, Anne M. (2000). Consumerism and "Compulsory Individuality": Women, Will and Potential. In Sara Ahmed, Jane Kilby, Celia Lury, Maureen McNeil, and Beverley Skeggs (Eds.), *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism* (pp. 273–287). London: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel. (1979). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, Michel. (2008). *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France 1973–1974*. New York: Picador.
- Gill, Rosalind. (2008). Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times. *Subjectivity*, 25(2008), 432–445.
- Halberstam, Judith. (2005). *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press.
- McRobbie, Angela. (2009). *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. London: Sage.
- Mendlesohn, Farah. (2009). *The Inter-Galactic Playground: A Critical Study of Children's and Teens' Science Fiction*. Jefferson: McFarland.
- Price, Susan. (1994). *Coming Down to Earth*. London: HarperCollins.
- Price, Susan. (1998). *The Sterkarm Handshake*. London: Scholastic.
- Price, Susan. (2003). *A Sterkarm Kiss*. London: Scholastic.
- Price, Susan. (2005). *Odin's Voice*. London: Simon & Schuster.
- Price, Susan. (2006). *Odin's Queen*. London: Simon & Schuster.
- Price, Susan. (2008). *Odin's Son*. London: Simon & Schuster.
- Reynolds, Kimberley. (2007). *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Russ, Joanna. (1981). Recent Feminist Utopias. In Marleen S. Barr (Ed.), *Future Females: A Critical Anthology* (pp. 71–85). Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press.
- Skeggs, Bev. (2005). The Making of Class and Gender Through Visualizing Moral Subject Formation. *Sociology*, 39(5), 965–982.
- Smith, Dorothy E. (1990). *Texts, Facts, and Femininity: Exploring the Relations of Ruling*. London: Routledge.
- Talbot, Mary. (2010). *Language and Gender* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- United Nations. (2008). The International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade—Factsheet: Slavery Today. Accessed August 3, 2011, from <http://www.un.org/events/slaveryremembrance/factsheet.shtml>.