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“One flesh, one end”

Queering the Eucharist in Tamsyn Muir’s *The Locked Tomb*

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This thesis explores the intersection of Catholic doctrine and queerness in the first three novels of Tamsyn Muir’s *The Locked Tomb* series: *Gideon the Ninth* (2019), *Harrow the Ninth* (2020) and *Nona the Ninth* (2022). It examines how the process of Lyctorhood mirrors Eucharistic themes of sacrifice, consumption and transformation, and ultimately queers and transgresses them. The books do so through the widespread queer identities of the characters and the introduction of a success/failure paradigm into a Eucharistic narrative. Drawing on Catholic theology, the first chapter of the thesis situates Lyctorhood as an image of the Eucharist, where the consumption of another becomes a mechanism of salvation and unity with God and others.

The second chapter brings in Jack Halberstam’s theory of queer failure to show how *The Locked Tomb* complicates this sacramental doctrine. Themes of forgetfulness, masochism and immorality—typically framed as antithetical to success and, by extension, spiritual salvation—work instead to question the establishment and offer alternative ways of knowing and doing. These motifs interrupt God’s plans in the fictional universe and, hence, the hegemonic narrative of Eucharistic success, inviting a queer reimagining of the sacrament.

By queering a central Catholic tenet, Muir’s work interrogates the limits of Eucharistic orthodoxy and finds a space for failure, deviance and bodily ambiguity within Catholic theology. This thesis thus contributes to interdisciplinary conversations between religious studies and queer theory in the context of literary studies.

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1 *The Locked Tomb: Queer and Religious Fiction*

There is a perfect Lyctorhood... and you let us think there wasn't.
—Mercymorn the First in *Harrow the Ninth*

Thus goes the harrowing reveal of God's betrayal in *The Locked Tomb* series. After spending months grappling with her traumatic losses, Harrowhark Nonagesimus learns that her sacrifices and suffering were, essentially, avoidable—God himself has pushed her and several others toward failure, resulting in the murder of their loved ones. This is just one example of the tragedy that abounds in *The Locked Tomb* series. Yet, despite the heavy subject matter of sacrifice and loss that permeates the whole narrative, there is something joyful about it. It could be due, in part, to a prose that skillfully balances rich worldbuilding, dramatic tone and abundant humor. It might also be the fact that it is indelibly and unapologetically queer. In a fictional world where most characters are sapphic women, where queerness seems to be undisputed and gender is “a weird buffet” throughout (Muir, “Lyctorhood as Genderfuckery”), Tamsyn Muir has written a tragedy with an earnestness and playfulness that sublimate it into an experience of queer joy.

This might be surprising in a series that draws heavily from Christian tradition and doctrine. However, *The Locked Tomb* is only one among many works of fiction that weave topics of religion and queerness with different intents and perspectives. Books like *Henry Henry* by Allen Bratton, *Dayspring* by Anthony Oliveira, *The Saint of Heartbreak* by Morgan Dante, *Angels Before Man* by Rafael Nicolás, *HIM* by Geoff Ryman, *Everyone in this Room Will Someday Be Dead* by Emily Austin, *The Bayou* by Arden Powell and *All the World Beside* by Garrad Conley range from deep explorations of the conflicts between these two aspects of identity to celebrations of queerness in retellings of biblical episodes. This trend is not exclusive to Christianity, with books such as *You Exist Too Much* by Zaina Arafat and *The Henna Wars* by Adiba Jaigirdar exploring these ideas in a Muslim context, and *When the Angels Left the Old Country* by Sacha Lamb, *Milk Fed* by Melissa Broder and *Disobedience* by Naomi Alderman doing the same in a Jewish one. I am sure that there are many more out there that I am not aware of yet.

With queer identities increasing in visibility and acceptance in different countries, it is no surprise that the relationship between queerness and religion has developed new layers of contact and conflict that writers are exploring in their works. As the novelist Daniel Lefferts

puts it, “people are ready for a more interesting conversation” about these topics (“Gay Novels”), one that reaches beyond the historical and widely explored antagonism between them. This, I believe, Tamsyn Muir manages well in *The Locked Tomb*, where the conversation between queerness and religion, and more broadly between transgression and doctrine/tradition, is at the core of the narrative. Considering the historical enmity and dynamics of oppression between the Catholic and queer communities, and the painful personal conflicts that often arise in those who belong to both, a contemporary work that engages meaningfully with them without painting these beliefs and identities as antithetical nor ignoring the tensions between them seems daring. Although I was not fully aware of these complexities when I first read the books, the intersection of Catholic thought with an explicitly queer perspective is where my enthusiasm for this series lies, and what I will be examining in this thesis.

The novels draw from sources as disparate as early 2000s internet memes, Eminem lyrics and Shakespeare plays, but biblical references significantly outnumber the rest. *The Locked Tomb* references Christianity and Catholicism extensively, acknowledging historical, literary and aesthetic elements, but also theological concepts such as sainthood and sacraments. The fact that one of the characters is God himself is the most obvious, with others being named after biblical or historical Catholic figures (Gideon, John, Marta, Paul, Abigail, Augustine, Anastasia). Various characters’ journeys echo that of Jesus in the New Testament—Muir herself has rather comically commented on the abundance of Christ figures in the series: “Check under your chair. Everyone gets a Christ” (“Lyctorhood as Genderfuckery”). However, my main point of interest and what this thesis will focus on are the religious and queer implications of the central plot element: Lyctorhood. In the series, this is a process that some characters undergo to obtain vast powers and eternal life, entailing a ritual of sacrifice and consumption that results in the transgression of personal and social boundaries.

Centering a narrative of bodily sacrifice and resurrection links the work thematically with the Christian—particularly Catholic—doctrine of the Eucharist, which is presented and enacted in the context of the queer relationships and identities of its characters. Most importantly, one of the turning points of the story involves the revelation that there are right and wrong ways of performing this ritual, introducing failure and success as possibilities in a Eucharistic narrative. Considering that, in Catholic theology, the Eucharist is ultimate manifestation of the latter, this is notably transgressive. In fact, the Eucharistic nature of Lyctorhood is far from leading characters toward salvation and forgiveness, as the sacrament is meant to do in

Catholic practice. Instead, Lyctorhood is revealed as a site of betrayal, unbecoming and death. Therefore, I suggest that *The Locked Tomb* is queer on two levels: first, in the non-normative identities of the characters, and second, in its introduction of failure/success parameters in a Eucharistic narrative, which transgresses Catholic doctrine. Furthermore, I pose that the possibilities of failure/success highlight the fallible quality of Lyctorhood, and by extension of the Church's sacraments and institutions.

The series' twisting and unsettling of Catholic doctrine through an odd and unconventional Eucharistic narrative, Lyctorhood, is the chief concern of this thesis. In it, I demonstrate how *The Locked Tomb* engages meaningfully with Eucharistic doctrine, only to question and undo it by situating it within a success-failure paradigm. This is relevant because challenging one of the central tenets of Catholicism introduces the possibility of reexamining and disputing other Catholic institutions. I will be conducting my analysis from the lens of Jack Halberstam's *queer art of failure*: the idea that narratives of success—such as Jesus' victory over death and sin, reenacted in the Eucharist—are inscribed in a cisheterosexual paradigm. From this connection follows that failure is an inherently queer enterprise that opens new avenues of knowledge and offers alternatives in the face of hegemony. Through close reading of excerpts from the three books, I will justify my interpretation of *The Locked Tomb* as specifically Catholic and analyze the manifestations and consequences of failed Lyctorhood to show how the series queers, i.e. transgresses, the Eucharist.

Due to their recent publication history and to the fact that the series is unfinished at the time of writing this thesis, there is a significant lack of academic criticism on these novels. As of yet, no peer-reviewed work on *The Locked Tomb* has been published. Some research has been done at the MA level, focusing on the feminist and queer aspects of the series,¹ but its religious dimension has not yet been examined. Despite the lack of peer-reviewed criticism, *The Locked Tomb* enjoys an active online community that works enthusiastically to untangle the complex web of characters and plot, theorize about the series' conclusion and locate

¹ "Queer Representation in Literature: Opening the Door to Self-Exploration and Identification With Tamsyn Muir" by Kendra Hurst (University of Southern New Hampshire) combines queer and feminist theory with an autoethnographic approach to explore the effects and consequences of queer representation in different works by Tamsyn Muir, including *The Locked Tomb*. "Getting Your Hands Dirty: Women in *The Locked Tomb* Series" by Catherine Isabelle M. Þráinsson (University of Iceland) analyzes the recent changes in representation of women and queer characters in speculative fiction. Although focused on *The Locked Tomb*, the author uses a comparative approach involving works such as *The Hunger Games* and *The Priory of the Orange Tree*.

references to other cultural objects. It does not seem far-fetched, then, to hope for further academic research into the series once it is completed.

More broadly, the intersection between spirituality and queerness has been widely explored in theological contexts² but has garnered limited attention from scholars in literary studies so far. One example is Susan Stanford Friedman's analysis of feminist/queer Muslim *bildungsromane* to advocate for an inclusion of religion in intersectional feminist studies. Another is Iria Seijas-Pérez's research on the negotiation of sapphic identities in Catholic schools as represented in Irish young adult fiction. With the recent proliferation of novels exploring the intersection of queerness and religion, as mentioned above, one might expect that the topic will enjoy more widespread attention in the future. Until then, this thesis is part of the limited academic criticism on the interaction between queerness and theology in literary studies. Having situated it thus, the following section will provide a detailed plot summary of *The Locked Tomb* with the aim of locating Lyctorhood within the wider narrative context.

1.1 Plot Summary

At the time of this writing, Tamsyn Muir's *The Locked Tomb* series consists of three books: *Gideon the Ninth* (2019), *Harrow the Ninth* (2020) and *Nona the Ninth* (2022). It is expected that a fourth and final book will be published in the near future.

Drawing from a vast array of genres—murder mystery, Gothic horror, coming-of-age, comedy, dystopia, Greek tragedy—and with different narrative styles and voices, *The Locked Tomb* weaves queerness and religion into a story that, as Muir herself has put it, is ultimately about “the horrors of love”³ (“Lyctorhood as Genderfuckery”). Considering the complex plot, the wide cast of characters involved and the length of the series, the following summary will focus only on those events and characters relevant to my analysis of Eucharistic images and queerness.

2 Some works of queer theology include: *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* by Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* by Patrick S. Cheng, *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* edited by Gerard Loughlin, *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* by Robert E. Shore-Goss, *Sex and the Church: Gender, Homosexuality, and the Transformation of Christian Ethics* by Kathy Rudy, and *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* by Linn Marie Tonstad.

3 Seems rather apt, then, that the series centers a narrative that can be read as an image of the Eucharist, also known as “the sacrament of love” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 47).

1.1.1 *Gideon the Ninth*⁴

“In the myriadic year of our Lord” (*Gideon* 15), Harrowhark Nonagesimus, heir of the Ninth House, receives a letter from God: the ranks of his Lyctors, an elite immortal force that protects him and the world, have been severely decimated in the last ten thousand years. God is now summoning eight necromancers, magicians who harness death magic, to travel to the planet known as the First House and study to ascend to Lyctorhood. By doing so, they will join God’s closest circle and aid in the centuries-old war the Empire of the Nine Houses is waging.

Each necromancer is bonded to a cavalier, someone sworn to be their companion and protector, and they are required to answer the summons together. This is no simple task for a dying House, one whose cavalier Ortus is a cowardly middle-aged man more interested in poetry than in swordsmanship. Adamant that the reputation and pride of her House be preserved, Harrow forces the only other youth in the Ninth, much less willing but a lot more capable than Ortus, to fill in the position. Gideon Nav accepts on the condition that, once Harrow becomes Lyctor, she be given freedom to leave the Ninth. Together, Harrow and Gideon travel to the First House, where they meet the seven other necromancer-cavalier pairs that have answered God’s call, and there they are left to discover the key to Lyctorhood with very little guidance. While going through different challenges that test their magical abilities and cooperation, the characters are haunted by a mysterious entity that kills several of them. Worried for their survival and forced to work together in the Lyctoral trials, Gideon and Harrow set their animosity aside in favour of a reluctant alliance that blossoms into a fierce loyalty with romantic undertones.

In the final chapters, the surviving pairs learn the identity of the killer, Cytherea, a rogue Lyctor who wants to prevent them from ascending in her vendetta against God. In a battle for their lives, the characters discover an unexpected and terrible truth: to achieve Lyctorhood, they must engage in ritualistic magic in which a necromancer absorbs their cavalier’s soul, effectively killing them. One of the ritual’s steps involves eating some part of the cavalier. This grants necromancers immortality, enhances their powers and gives them access to their cavaliers’ abilities with the sword.

⁴ *Gideon the Ninth* will hereon be referred to as *Gideon*.

Ianthe, necromancer of the Third House, has no qualms about killing her cavalier and becoming the first Lyctor to ascend in ten thousand years. Harrow and the others find this abominable, but they are at a clear disadvantage in a confrontation against not one, but two Lyctors when Cytherea joins the fray. Out of options and with their lives on the line, Gideon sacrifices herself, forcing Harrow to complete the Lyctoral process. Harrow ascends and defeats Cytherea with her newly acquired powers. The book ends with God collecting Harrow and Ianthe from the First House, instating them as his Lyctors.

1.1.2 *Harrow the Ninth*⁵

Harrow and Ianthe are brought to the space station where God lives with the three remaining, original Lyctors. There, the young women are trained in their new abilities. Ianthe takes to her new role more willingly than Harrow, who seems unable to fully access her Lyctoral powers. What is more, she does not remember Gideon and her memories of the First House are completely distorted. Throughout their training, the two women help and hinder each other in an obsessive relationship occasionally underlined with sexual tension.

The ending yields three main reveals. First, that Gideon was God's daughter. Second, that Harrow had, in her grief, decided to erase all memories of her cavalier as a way of avoiding her complete absorption and assimilation. Another Lyctor had previously managed this: Gideon the First, one of the original necromancers to ascend, had unwittingly preserved his cavalier's soul inside him. During the past myriad, Pyrrha has occasionally controlled his body, eventually taking over completely when Gideon the First dies.

Most important is the third revelation: that there is a perfect Lyctorhood which avoids the death of the cavaliers. God, originally a man, has managed it and purposefully misguided the necromancers to steer them towards a failed ritual. Although perfect Lyctorhood grants him unlimited powers, it also makes him vulnerable because, by tying his soul so closely to his cavalier's, their fates are inextricable: the death of one means the death of the other. God has kept the secret of perfect Lyctorhood and of his cavalier's whereabouts to hide his one weakness and secure a position of power. This revelation fractures the relationship between the Lyctors and God, with only Ianthe siding with him by the end of the book.

⁵ *Harrow the Ninth* will hereon be referred to as *Harrow*.

1.1.3 *Nona the Ninth*⁶

The third installment follows two narrative threads. On the one hand, God tells his origin story, revealing, first and foremost, that he was originally an ordinary man. His account also explains the identity of his cavalier and the circumstances that led him to discover necromancy and Lyctorhood. In the process, it becomes clear that his lies extend beyond perfect Lyctorhood and that the war the Nine Houses are waging against other planets is part of an imperialist project and a personal vendetta. The parallel narrative follows Nona, an unknown young woman who allies herself with Pyrrha and the Sixth House necromancer-cavalier pair, Palamedes and Camilla, to discover the truth of her identity. Through her, readers discover the devastating effects of the war on people outside the Nine Houses. God's specific motives behind the Empire's colonialist and expansionist endeavor remain unclear at the time of writing this thesis.

While *Nona* deals with Lyctorhood in that it explains its origins and expands on the extent and consequences of God's deceit, the main plot revolves around the title character's journey and the colonialist and ecocritical aspects of the Nine Houses' establishment and purpose, and therefore my analysis focuses mostly on *Gideon* and *Harrow*.

As this summary shows, *The Locked Tomb* revolves heavily around the consequences of Lyctorhood, a process that emulates the Christian narrative of salvation through participation in the Eucharist: characters obtain eternal life through sacrifice and consumption. This is interwoven with queerness on different levels, from the characters' identities to the thematic implications of the tension between failed and perfect Lyctorhood. Since the second is the main focus of this thesis and will be dealt with in Chapter Two, I will now provide an overview of the non-normative identities portrayed in the series. This will help create a more in-depth picture of the wide cast of characters and their relationships, severely reduced in the summary above, to aid comprehension of the analysis in the following chapters and highlight the extent of queer presence in-universe.

⁶ *Nona the Ninth* will hereon be referred to as *Nona*.

1.2 “I am a nonsense”: Gender and Sexuality in *The Locked Tomb*

It is striking to find a speculative fiction book series that engages extensively with Catholicism to be as women-centric as *The Locked Tomb*. Genre-wise, speculative fiction has traditionally been written by and for men, while simultaneously, Catholic doctrine has historically reinforced misogynist hierarchies—irrespective of the discrepancies between this gender inequality with the most fundamental aspects of its theology. A cursory look at the three dramatis personae may make it seem as though the series places equal importance in men and women, with a fairly balanced gender representation. However, *The Locked Tomb* comes across as women-centric because the three protagonists and main narrators/focalizers are women, and their most significant relationships and desires involve other women. This is already transgressive in that it allows the characters to occupy a vast range of archetypes—from warrior to scholar, lover to villain—challenging the traditional gender roles attached to them. A good example is to be found with the necromancer-cavalier pairs in *Gideon*: where one would expect the more physical role to fall on the men, it is equally divided, with four women and four men serving as cavaliers.

Gideon, the first book’s protagonist and focalizer, embodies the subversion of traditional gender roles as a muscled, boyish swordswoman whose lifelong wish is to join the army. Other characters like Camilla and Corona, Ianthe’s twin, are also mentioned to be highly skilled in combat. The Second House, associated with military officials, is represented by two women. But more intellectual roles are also taken on by women: Harrow, Abigail (the Fifth House’s necromancer) and Ianthe are recognized as exceptional necromancers. This last one complicates the traditional *femme fatale* role of female villains, hiding her cunning and ruthlessness behind an anodyne and vapid persona, a “smaller, insubstantial ... starved shadow” (*Gideon* 73) next to her sister’s charm and beauty. As a Lyctor, she repeatedly attempts to dress in delicate, feminine clothing, with poor results: “They looked like her burial clothes, and she looked as though she had emerged fifty years after that burial” (*Harrow* 146).

Yet *The Locked Tomb* goes beyond the traditional, cisnormative roles in its gender transgressions. In a world where bodies and souls become fragmented and intermingle freely through Lyctorhood, it should come as no surprise to find that the characters exhibit what Muir has called “a serious case of gender” (“Lyctorhood as Genderfuckery”). During *Nona*, Ianthe temporarily takes over the dead body of her cavalier, a young man, and receives the title “Lyctor Prince” (225). Similarly, after Gideon’s parentage is revealed, she is resurrected

by God (how or with what consequences remains to be seen) and titled “Her *Most* Serene Highness, Crown Prince” (209). At one point, she demands Ianthe “stop playing the good son” (469); all of this, while both continue using she/her pronouns.

Pyrrha is another example of genderqueerness, as she retains her name and pronouns while inhabiting the male body of her deceased Lyctor. Palamedes, necromancer of the Sixth House who is thought dead at the end of *Gideon*, manages to live on inside Camilla, his cavalier. They are separated by a few seconds of consciousness, taking turns to control her body and communicating via written notes. When their lives become endangered, the necromancer-cavalier pair choose to perform their own version of the Lyctoral process rather than be separated by death: instead of one soul being consumed (imperfect Lyctorhood) or both feeding from each other (perfect Lyctorhood), theirs merge completely. No longer Camilla-and-Palamedes, they become a single, new being who chooses the name Paul and uses they/them pronouns.

Despite the books being marketed with the tagline “lesbian necromancers in space” (Muir, “Tamsyn Muir Queers the Space Opera”) and the author repeatedly identifying her characters as such—in *Gideon*’s case, she specifies a “butch lesbian” (“Butch Lesbian Sci-Fi Aesthetic”)—, *The Locked Tomb* lacks explicit mentions of queer identity labels. There is a single instance of the word *gay* in *Harrow* (“Ianthe had walked away from you, all split lips and gay loneliness”; 288); while the words *lesbian*, *homosexual* or *queer* never appear in the series. Still, it does not seem far-fetched to state that queerness is the norm. The story is narrated from an unequivocal sapphic lens—despite the presence of men throughout the story, whenever a character expresses desire or attraction toward another, the object is always a woman. This is not mere coincidence: after the publication of *Gideon*, Muir expressed that she wished to portray the “inevitably homoerotic relationship between every woman who stands next to another woman for more than five seconds” by writing a book “where every girl could possibly hook up with every other girl” (“Butch Lesbian Sci-Fi Aesthetic”). Indeed, almost all women in the series are identified as potentially desirable. Coronabeth is the most conventionally attractive; *Gideon* calls her “golden” (*Gideon* 98), “lovely” (100), “magnificent” (235) and “astonishingly hot” (110), with Nona providing a more arresting description:

She had skin like amber and wonderful hair exactly the colour of golden sugar, and if she had ever been in a queue to get something from a shop everyone would

have asked her where she had been all their lives. You could have sold tickets to see her. (*Nona* 143)

Her twin, in contrast, is “pallid” (*Gideon* 99), “repellent” (153) and “anaemic” (174), and yet Harrow says of her: “You realised, not for the first time, and not willingly, that Ianthe Tridentarius was beautiful” (*Harrow* 15-16). Nona notes the differences between “raw and ropy and square-shouldered” Pyrrha, still in Gideon the First’s body, and “long and shadowy and lean” Camilla, but finds the two of them “exquisite” (*Nona* 25)—even though, when told, the first one wonders if she is joking (“I look like two elbows”; 137).

Sapphic desire is not merely a conclusion drawn from physical descriptions, it is explicitly addressed in the text, although none of the characters have successfully acted on their feelings at this point in the series. Describing her mistaken trust in Cytherea, Gideon recalls:

“Sometimes a cute older girl shows you a lot of attention, because she’s bored or whatever, and you sort of have this maybe-flirting maybe-not thing going on ... it happens all the time” (*Harrow* 413). Gideon and Harrow’s relationship is central to the story; despite the lack of conventional signs of romance, their devotion leaves no doubt as to the nature of their affection: “The entire point of me is you” (*Gideon* 432), “I cannot conceive of a universe without you in it” (437). Ianthe, though constantly playing with and undermining Harrow, harbors complicated feelings toward her fellow Lyctor: “Someday I’ll marry that girl” (*Harrow* 364). Coronabeth and Pyrrha are in love with other women, and several of the original Lyctors are known to have been in queer relationships with their former cavaliers.

Overall, *The Locked Tomb* presents a rich story where queer women are predominantly represented, allowing for truly complex characters to emerge from, play with and challenge conventional archetypes and gender roles. Doing so adds another layer of transgression to a story entrenched in Catholic theology. However, much as non-normative identities are predominant in *The Locked Tomb*, the series’ queering of Catholic doctrine goes beyond populating a Eucharistic narrative with sapphic or gender-nonconforming characters. From hereon, this thesis will focus on a parallel aspect of transgression following Halberstam’s concept of failure as a queer enterprise that departs from cisheterosexually-coded narratives of success. The following analysis will show how the characters’ failure to achieve perfect Lyctorhood does not only trigger new gendered configurations for some—it challenges a hegemonical Christian narrative of success. Where participation in the Eucharist is supposed to represent the ultimate triumph of humanity over death and sin, in Muir’s version of the Eucharist the characters are murderers, some become sick or physically impaired, and they

lose their bodily integrity. I suggest that problematizing one of the central Catholic beliefs opens the possibility of doing the same with other aspects of the religion.

To illustrate failed Lyctorhood's queering of the sacrament, I will first give a detailed account of the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, showing how *The Locked Tomb* engages with it thematically and how Lyctorhood can be read as a Eucharistic image. Once the theological context and the importance of the sacrament are clear, Chapter Two will delve into Halberstam's concept of queer failure and analyze its manifestations in the books, which eventually lead to the unveiling of God's secrets and unsettle the foundations of the Nine Houses'—and, by extension, Catholic—hegemony.

2 “All I ever wanted you to do was eat me”: Lyctorhood as Catholic Eucharist

The Eucharist represents the culmination of what is known in Christianity as the *history of salvation*, a series of covenants between God and humanity that lead to his incarnation and sacrifice, reenacted in the Eucharistic ritual. Narrated in the Bible, the history of salvation starts with the separation of the different elements of creation—light and darkness; firmament, land and water; male and female (*New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition*,⁷ Gen. 1)—and reaches its pinnacle with God becoming one with humanity through his incarnation, death and resurrection. The doctrine of the Eucharist, central to Catholic theology, reveals a profound interplay of belief, ritual, and embodiment, and plays with the tension between distance and closeness to—even unity with—God. Moreover, the Eucharist constitutes the formulation and fulfillment of a final promise from God: humanity’s victory over death and sin. As such, it can be considered the ultimate Christian narrative of success. Inasmuch as *The Locked Tomb*’s Lyctorhood—where sacrifice and consumption are the gateway to eternal life—is an image of the Eucharist, this chapter examines the basis, significance and consequences of this doctrine to establish a framework within which to analyze the series’ portrayal of the concepts of hegemonical success and queer failure.

An in-depth exploration of the doctrine of the Eucharist is relevant for this thesis for two reasons. First, because its ritual and consequences are emulated in *The Locked Tomb*’s Lyctorhood, and second, because the sacrament’s emphasis on the body (as a crucial human dimension inseparable from the spirit) and on the transgression of social boundaries may be an interesting point to start locating queerness within Catholicism. This chapter’s review of the Eucharist will be conducted through an analysis of the Bible and other key Catholic theological texts, as well as of excerpts from *The Locked Tomb* that illustrate the series’ engagement with this doctrine. Sections 2.1 and 2.2 will outline the scriptural basis and the significance of the ritual, which evokes Jesus’ invitation—prior to his crucifixion and resurrection—to consume his body and blood. The potentially symbolic or literal nature of these instructions has engendered heated discussions throughout history; therefore, section 2.3 will look at the Catholic Church’s position in the debate and the controversies it has sparked. It will also comment on the related, contradictory accusations the Church has simultaneously

⁷ All quotations from the Bible are from this version unless otherwise stated.

received and weaponized against minorities like the queer community. Section 2.4 will analyze the erasure of boundaries that ensue from the Eucharist, resulting in a union between humanity and God where eternal life and the overcoming of sin become realized. As will be shown, the Eucharist's amalgamating power resonates with the inherently transgressive nature of queerness. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a brief overview of other references in Tamsyn Muir's series to further demonstrate its engagement with Catholicism.

2.1 The Biblical Institution of the Eucharist

According to the Catholic Church, the significance of the Eucharist rests in that it commemorates "the last event to which all events in the history of salvation look and which fulfills and manifests the final plans of God" (*General Catechetical Directory* 12). After the original sin establishes the need for redemption, God leads humankind toward it through a series of covenants in the Old Testament that are renovated and fulfilled in his incarnation in the form of his son, Jesus, and his subsequent sacrifice and resurrection. There is no consensus on the exact number of covenants spoken in the Old Testament, but some major ones involve God's promise to preserve all life on Earth (to Noah in Gen. 9.8-11); to make a just man numerous in descendants (to Abraham in Gen. 17.1-8), and to bring a savior for humankind (to David in 2 Sam. 7.8-17). Jesus' sacrifice is the final and main covenant, and its formulation and fulfillment are reenacted in the Eucharistic ritual.

This ritual reprises Jesus' last words and actions before his sacrifice, which take place during what is known as the Last Supper. Aware that the time of his death is fast approaching, Jesus gathers his disciples to celebrate Passover, the Jewish holiday that commemorates the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. When they are seated, he shares his final teachings and performs the set of actions that herald the institution of the Eucharist:

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matt. 22.19-20)

This event immediately precedes his arrest. Once condemned, Jesus is made to carry a cross on the way to his crucifixion, he dies after asking God to forgive his killers and is resurrected three days later. The passage above provides the scriptural basis for the Eucharistic ritual, which Christians perform in commemoration of his sacrifice, following Jesus' exhortation to repeat his actions.

God's sacrifice through the figure of Jesus, his son, is replicated in *The Locked Tomb* in the character of Gideon. When faced with certain death, Gideon follows a path similar to Jesus': she forgives Harrow for the harm the necromancer has caused her and impales herself on a spike. One of her last utterances is the necromancer-cavalier oath, "One flesh, one end" (432), which foreshadows the incorporation that is to take place upon her death. Although Gideon's sacrifice would be evocative enough as is, the comparison with Jesus becomes unavoidable when it is revealed that Gideon is God's daughter.

2.2 The Eucharist: Ritual and Sacrament

The celebration of the Eucharist is the central act of worship in the Catholic Church and it generally takes place during mass, the main liturgical celebration in Catholicism. Catholic mass involves two fundamental parts with the objective of nurturing believers both physically and spiritually: the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*⁸ 1346). The first is established in accordance with Matthew 4.4, where Jesus states that God's word is as necessary for life as bread. It consists of readings from the Old and New Testaments, a homily that expands on the themes of the readings, intercessions and offerings. Afterward, during the liturgy of the Eucharist, an ordained priest emulates the words and gestures performed by Jesus during the Last Supper. After a series of communal prayers and signs of peace, the priest consecrates wheat bread and grape wine to share with the congregation in what is both corporeal and spiritual nourishment. The Catholic Church teaches that, through the priest's words, Jesus is made present in the bread and wine and those who partake in the sacrament eat and drink it to become one with each other and with God (*Catechism* 1353). Section 2.4 will further explain how the promised eternal life arises from this union between human and divine; likewise, necromancers in *Gideon* obtain eternal life after spiritually and, as will be explained below, physically eating their cavaliers during the Lyctoral process.

A person's journey within Catholicism is marked by a series of rites of passage which constitute the key moments of their spiritual life and may change their status within the Church, whose rituals and significance are shaped in imitation of specific events in the New Testament. These are called *sacraments*, which the *Catechism* describes as "efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed"

⁸ From hereon referred to as *Catechism*.

(1131). Christian denominations differ on the number of sacraments, but the Catholic Church recognizes seven: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Matrimony (*Catechism* 1210). Among these, the Eucharist is considered the greatest (Aquinas, III, Q. 65, Art. 3), the “sum and summary” of the Catholic faith (*Catechism* 1327). For this reason, believers are required to participate in the sacrament weekly on Sundays and on days of observance, once a year at minimum (1389). They are also asked to do so in a “state of grace”, that is, free from mortal sins; if committed, they must be confessed in the sacrament of Penance before participating in the Eucharist (1415). Where sin, according to the *Catechism*, is any action that turns a person away and distances them from God (1850), virtue and holiness involve closing that distance “to become like God” (1803). This closeness reaches its peak through the Eucharist.

The concepts of sacrament and sin are also mentioned in *The Locked Tomb*, but they seem to have different significance and implications. The word *sacramental* appears often in Harrow to describe the traditional vestments and face paint Harrow dons. However, these only belong to the Ninth House and do not seem to be recognized by the other houses. As a Lyctor, Harrow is once called a “walking sacrament” (*Harrow* 28), but that seems to be the only connection between the two concepts. Instead, Lyctorhood is referred to as sinful by various characters, with God himself calling it “indelible sin” (43) even as he claims to not believe in sin (340); this could be read as him understanding the gravity of the murder committed even if he does not attach a theological meaning or consequence to it.

Although not named as such, *The Locked Tomb* also references Penance and its place preceding the Eucharist, i.e. closeness with God. Marking a turning point in their relationship, Harrow confesses to Gideon (God’s daughter) that she is the product of her parents’ “necromantic sin” (*Gideon* 353): they massacred children in order to secure enough death power to conceive a necromancer. Later, Harrow confesses to having opened the Tomb that contains “the death of God” (*Harrow* 50), the body of a woman which the Ninth House was created to guard and keep locked (348).⁹ The first confession comes before the final confrontation that results in Gideon’s sacrifice, and the forgiveness she affords her necromancer is restated right before her death. The second is offered when Harrow feels

⁹ The central plot of the series revolves around the mysterious entity locked inside the Tomb. The reason why this was excluded from the plot summary is that neither its identity nor history are connected enough to the Eucharistic image I am analyzing in this thesis, and therefore I have chosen not to expand on it so as to narrow my focus.

unworthy of God's paternal feelings toward her. Both are related to moments of closeness with God or his daughter and can therefore be read as images of Penance in the series.

Despite the unity it supposedly entails, the Eucharist has been a source of contention between different Christian denominations throughout history; the nature and significance of the ritual acts and objects involved in this sacrament have been widely debated among theologians and believers, at times with violent consequences. One central point of debate has been the matter of Jesus' presence in the bread and wine. Beliefs on the means, moment and nature of this presence differ between denominations—Catholicism, for example, teaches that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ during the liturgy of the Eucharist. This concept, known as *transubstantiation*, becomes highly controversial when one considers the consumption involved in the Eucharistic ritual, and is addressed in the Lyctoral process in *The Locked Tomb*. The next section will outline the philosophical roots of transubstantiation, the biblical sources upon which this belief rests and briefly address the accusations Catholicism has faced as a consequence of this doctrine.

2.3 Transubstantiation: The Actual Body of Christ?

At the heart of the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist is the concept of *transubstantiation*. This belief has long distinguished Catholicism from other Christian denominations, making the Eucharist not only a site of union and transcendence but also of tension and controversy. While the sacrament is celebrated as the ultimate expression of Jesus' sacrifice and presence, its central claim has also provoked accusations of grotesque corporeality and even cannibalism, which, as will be shown later, curiously echo those faced by the queer community at the height of the AIDS crisis.

Although the concept predates the introduction of Aristotelian metaphysics into Western theology, the doctrine of transubstantiation evokes Aristotelian ideas of substance and accident. The Catholic Church holds that, during the liturgy of the Eucharist, the substances of the consecrated bread and wine are changed into the substances of the body and blood of Jesus (*Catechism* 1376) in a process "surpassing understanding" (1333). This transformation cannot be detected but by faith (Aquinas, III, Q. 75, Art.1), since the accidents of the bread and the wine remain the same to the senses. While the "Eucharistic species" (*Catechism* 1374) are unchanged externally, they are radically transformed in essence. This is controversial in light of the consumption involved in the Eucharistic ritual: Catholics are required to eat the bread and drink the wine, i.e. the *actual* body and blood of Christ, to obtain eternal life and

forgiveness for their sins. Likewise, bodily consumption is one of the steps toward Lyctorhood.

Belief in the real presence of Jesus in the bread and wine is based on some passages of the New Testament that mention the consumption and incorporation of Jesus' body and blood as central acts for salvation. Most known are his words during the Last Supper, quoted above from the gospel of Matthew but also found in Mark 14.22-24 and Luke 22.19-20. Although the gospel of John does not contain a similar scene, it features a striking speech that announces the institution of the Eucharist:

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." (John 6.48-56)

Jesus tells his followers that the way to eternal life is through consumption of his body and blood; whether this is to be taken as symbolic or literal is the core of the debate between denominations. It is notable that John goes on to mention how many who hear this speech find it difficult and stop following Jesus (John 6.60, 66). Thus, this passage is seen as justification for belief in transubstantiation, but also as heralding the conflicts that arise from it.

In similar fashion, necromancers must eat their cavaliers in order to become Lyctors. This act of consumption is mostly concerned with the soul, but not exclusively. When it is discovered that Ianthe has ascended to Lyctorhood, she explains that the process involves several steps, of which two are "*incorporate* [the soul]" and "*consume the flesh*" of the cavalier, although it does not need to be "the whole thing" because "a drop of blood will do" (*Gideon* 383). Even though the consumption can be partial, the cavalier is not meant to survive the process. Ianthe goes on to proclaim: "I haven't *killed* Naberius Tern. I *ate* Naberius Tern" (384). The Lyctoral process is referred to as eating in several instances, such as when Gideon reflects on her own sacrifice: "I already gave my flesh to you ... because all I ever wanted you to do was eat me" (*Harrow* 434). Others include Harrow saying she does not have a "properly ingested cavalier" (222) and calling Ianthe's "breakfast" (385).

2.3.1 Accusations of Cannibalism

Thomas Aquinas asserts that the bread and wine remain unchanged to the senses in the Eucharist, and therefore there is no physical eating of human flesh, which he points out is “not customary, but horrible” (Aquinas, III, Q. 75, Art. 5). Nevertheless, transubstantiation has fueled anti-Catholic arguments in this manner. The dogma has sparked misunderstandings and grotesque accusations throughout history: from early Christians in Rome, Egypt, Gaul and Asia Minor (Moss 344) and French Catholics in 18th century America being charged with cannibalism (Cevasco 572), to post-Reformation England demanding monarchs and government officials to swear an oath that transubstantiation was “superstitious and idolatrous” until the early 20th century (McEvoy 49). *The Locked Tomb* acknowledges the problematic nature of transubstantiation in the non-Lyctor characters’ view of Lyctorhood. Upon discovering that Ianthe has murdered and eaten her cavalier, the necromancer of the Eighth names her “heretic” and sentences her to death (*Gideon* 386). Moreover, Palamedes explicitly calls Lyctors “half-dead cannibals” (*Nona* 291). From their words, one can assume that the concept of cannibalism exists in *The Locked Tomb* universe and that it is as taboo as in real life (the moral dimension of Lyctorhood will be further explored in the following chapter).

Candida R. Moss explains that, in the context of the Roman Empire, accusations of this kind are not unique to the Christian religion, but that they serve to justify the ostracization and dehumanization of certain social groups (349, 351). This is a tendency that has continued through the centuries. It is not surprising then that Catholics themselves have wielded similar accusations against ethnic and racial minorities to portray them as savage and inhuman (Cevasco 567). Kilgour states that this is a frequent tactic employed by political “bodies” that wish for the total incorporation of a resisting minority onto themselves (5), i.e. a metaphorical cannibalism. As a minority, queer and more specifically homosexual people have been on the receiving end of these accusations as well. In an analysis of Herman Melville’s novels, Caleb Crain points out that in the 19th century, cannibalism and homosexuality share a rhetoric form by virtue of being “unspeakable” (28), both portrayed as savage practices and as “a double bind of attraction and repulsion” (32). The connection carried on to the last decades of the 20th century, where the panic that arose from the HIV/AIDS pandemic established a link between homosexuality and the exchange of bodily fluids as a form of cannibalistic consumption. This was born first from the belief that the virus was transmitted solely through homosexual

intimacy, and second because both activities “disrupt difference and confound identity” (Westengard 134).

It is in these confounded identities that one can find further connections between queerness and Catholicism. The next section will explain the transgressive nature of the Eucharist. Given that the sacrament is not only a site of individual salvation, but also of collective union with the whole of humanity and with God, it involves a radical erasure of boundaries that resonates with the way queer identities challenge the binaries and hierarchies that structure society.

2.4 “We who are many are one body”: Erasure of Boundaries in the Eucharist

From locating queer identities within biblical texts (Nissinen) to formulating a Christology that is fluid and avoids either/or constrictions (Althaus-Reid), theologians have worked to find a space for queerness in Catholic doctrine. This is no easy task considering the Church’s history of repression and persecution of the community. In fact, discussions of queerness in Christian contexts often lead back to the same biblical passages: the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13, and a few passages in Corinthians and Timothy (Nissinen 4; Shore-Goss 159). These are what queer theologians consider the “texts of terror”, a term coined by Phyllis Trible in her analysis of biblical narratives that victimize women, which are used to sanction negative and intolerant attitudes toward queer people (5). Not typically included by scholars among these, but perhaps most popular, is the infamous “male and female he created them” (Gen. 1.27), commonly wielded to discredit homosexual relationships and queer gender identities. Those who justify their bigotry with this quote forget, or willingly ignore, the amalgamating effect of the Eucharist, succinctly formulated in Galatians 3.28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, *there is no longer male and female*; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (emphasis added).

Just as Jesus challenges social norms by associating with minorities and outcasts throughout his life, the transgressive nature of his teachings extends to his death and its commemoration in the Eucharist. Oneness with other humans and with God is the ultimate objective of Christianity since, as explained above, it is synonymous with overcoming sin. It makes sense that this unity is achieved through eating: Kilgour argues that incorporation confounds the inside/outside or eater/eaten dichotomies because it “depends upon and enforces an absolute division between [them]; but in the act itself that opposition disappears, dissolving the structure it appears to produce” (4). Through consumption and incorporation, the Christian

narrative of success culminates in the dismantling of the hierarchies that divide society and rule social interactions. All who take part in the Eucharistic ritual are thought to become one “corporate body in whom all human beings meet in the transcendence of racial, class, and sexual differences” (Kilgour 234). The Bible expresses this in 1 Cor. 10.16: “We who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread”. Therefore, Jesus’ sacrifice bridges the dichotomies that divide people into rich and poor, sick and healthy, sinner and pious, men and women, among others.

The amalgamating potential of the Eucharist does not stop in the mundane, however. The Catholic Church holds that Jesus is both “truly God and truly man” (*Catechism* 467). As a consequence, the human/divine dichotomy is bridged by Jesus’ own existence—likewise, *The Locked Tomb* refers to the character of God as “God who became man and man who became God” (*Gideon* 239). Believers participate in challenging the human/divine dichotomy through consumption in the Eucharist; of the sacrament in particular, Kilgour claims it implies a “reciprocal incorporation” since the food, God, “converts the feeder into himself” (15). Jesus acknowledges this reciprocity: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (John 6.56). Therefore, in consuming his body and blood, Christians “form a single body” not only with each other, but with God as well (*Catechism* 1331).

This part of the doctrine is also present in Muir’s books: when God asks the necromancers to partake in the Lyctoral trials, he invites them to become his “bones and joints, his fists and gestures” (*Gideon* 39). Lyctors are thus referred to as God’s body parts, e.g. “Holy Finger, Holy Thumb” (*Harrow* 74), “his Hand” (84). Lyctors also lose their original House affiliation to join God’s House, the First: Ianthe the Third becomes Ianthe the First, Harrow the Ninth becomes Harrow the First.

Once the division between human and divine is blurred, other dichotomies follow. This sacrament also challenges the division between transient/eternal and life/death, rendered obsolete by Jesus achieving and granting eternal life, and body/soul, whose inseparability (*Gaudium et Spes* 14) is made manifest in the doctrine’s emphasis on physicality. Section 1.2 already explored the queer aspects of the transgression of bodily boundaries in Lyctorhood. Here, it is enough to restate that the Lyctoral process challenges the bodily identities of necromancers, leading to spiritual and physical changes as a result of incorporating another person’s soul: besides becoming powerful and immortal, their eyes change color to match their late cavalier’s.

Overall, the erasure of boundaries through the Eucharist echoes the queer challenging of binary narratives that mold society to the cisheterosexual paradigm. Perhaps this is one reason behind the growing popularity of fiction that weaves themes of (Christian) religion and queer identity and desire, as mentioned in the introduction. In any case, *The Locked Tomb* contains these ideas of blurred bodily and social boundaries as a consequence of consumption and incorporation.

2.5 Other Religious References in *The Locked Tomb*

Muir's engagement with Catholicism in *The Locked Tomb* is extensive and goes beyond what has been commented on thus far. The previous sections have explained the theological context and significance of the Catholic Eucharist and its ritual, locating references to it in the series to justify the interpretation of Lyctorhood as a Eucharistic image. Having done so, it is interesting to mention other ways in which *The Locked Tomb* presents itself as a Catholic text, which remains surprising in that it coexists with the complete normalization and presence of queer identities in-universe. Some examples are the veneration of saints applied to Lyctors; the presence of rosaries, strings of beads that represent a set of prayers, which are mentioned directly or as "prayer beads" (*Gideon* 26), and the description of the chapel in God's space station which evokes a Gothic church.

There are also religious references that, although not exclusively Catholic, serve to highlight this aspect of the books when placed next to the thematic engagement with the doctrine explored in this chapter. Easily noticeable are the titles of God's chapters in *Nona*, which emulate Bible verses: "John 20:8" (13), "John 15:23" (98), etc. The Ninth House's reclusiveness and the robes they wear recall those of religious orders—in fact, the members of the House are referred to as "nuns" (*Gideon* 23), "penitents ... mystics and pilgrims" (24) and "anchorites" (353). Necromancers break into "blood sweat" when performing magic (32), like Jesus does before his death (Luke 22.44). The place where Lyctorhood was first discovered and developed is called Canaan House, a reference to Jesus' first public miracle in the Wedding at Cana (John 2.1-11). God insists on being called *Teacher*, a title also used in the Bible (John 13.13-14). In an interview with *Vox*, Muir stated that Peter's denial of Jesus (Luke 22.54-62) was on her mind as she wrote of Harrow forgetting Gideon after her sacrifice ("Tamsyn Muir Queers the Space Opera"). Throughout *Harrow*, the title character carries her late cavalier's two-handed sword strapped to her back in an image that recalls Jesus carrying the cross before his crucifixion (John 19.17). Other textual references include "the dark night

of the soul” (*Nona* 168), the title of a poem by John of the Cross, a Spanish mystic and Catholic writer, and Gideon’s last words to Harrow: “The land that shall receive thee dying, in the same will I die: and there will I be buried. The Lord do so and so to me, and add more also, if aught but death part me and thee” (*Gideon* 438; *Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition*, Ruth 1:17).¹⁰

This chapter has offered an in-depth analysis of the Eucharist based on the Bible and other key theological texts. The aim has been to explain the scriptural basis and theological significance of the doctrine, as well as the debates that arise from it. This has been interwoven with an analysis of excerpts from *The Locked Tomb*, hopefully justifying the interpretation of Lyctorhood as an image of the Eucharist and showing how Muir’s writing acknowledges Catholic doctrine extensively, while simultaneously complicating it. By doing so, I have laid the framework within which I wish to examine narratives of hegemonical success interrupted by failure in these books. Therefore, the following chapter will examine how Lyctorhood, and by extension the Eucharist, is problematized with the revelation that the characters have failed to perform it properly. Drawing from Halberstam’s theory of queer failure, I will analyze the different manifestations of the characters’ “failed” Lyctorhood, focusing on three of Halberstam’s proposed “other forms of knowledge” (52): forgetfulness, masochism and immorality. Through close-reading directed at different characters, I will demonstrate how the Christian narrative of the Eucharist as the ultimate success is queered in *The Locked Tomb*.

10 Other biblical references in *The Locked Tomb* include, but are not limited to: Gen. 1.31, Eccles. 4.12; Lam. 1.9; Ps. 27, 137 and 139; 2 Tim. 4.7; John 1.23, 19.30 and 20.13, and Rev. 21.4.

3 “Bloody truth, and blessed ignorance”: Queer Implications of Failed Lyctorhood

Cytherea the First, upon revealing her true identity and motives to sabotage the Lyctoral trial in *Gideon*, says of Lyctorhood: “It is neither life nor death—it’s something in between, and nobody should ever ask you to embrace it” (402). As readers discover throughout the series, to be a Lyctor is to be a necromancer of unparalleled power, with an immortal lifespan that few circumstances can truncate. It is to be considered one of God’s closest and venerated as a saint by the members of the Nine Houses. It is, also, to live for ten thousand years with the guilt of their cavalier’s sacrifice. To be not healthy and whole, but perpetually dying and fragmented. To suffer unexplainable memory losses that make them fear for their sanity. And, at the end of *Harrow*, to discover it never had to be like that; that all along their ailments and difficulties were manifestations of an inherently faulty process. Most tragic is the discovery that God had knowingly misguided necromancers to prevent their becoming as powerful as him. Mercymorn the First, one of the original Lyctors, explains it succinctly:

There is a perfect Lyctorhood... a perfect Lyctor process that preserves the cavalier, and you let us think there wasn’t. You let us think we’d cracked it ... You watched us kill our cavaliers in cold blood, and none of them had to die. You had already done it yourself. But *you* had done it *perfectly*!! (*Harrow* 481)

The previous chapter’s discussion of Lyctorhood as an image of the Catholic Eucharist, combined with this turning point in *Harrow*, lends the narrative a new dimension. Mercymorn’s words not only reframe previous events and determine the direction of the story: they also problematize the Christian narrative of the Eucharist as the ultimate success, the culmination of the history of salvation. This reveal provides a new way of locating queerness within the text beyond the actual and diverse identities represented, where *queer* expands its definition to include any action that defies or deviates from the norms that uphold hegemonical paradigms. To explain how this is so, this chapter will delve into Jack Halberstam’s theory of queer failure, as well as touch on José Esteban Muñoz’s queer temporality and Sara Ahmed’s dis/orientations. This will be done with the aim of reading imperfect Lyctorhood as a transgressive endeavor in the face of God’s perfect one. For this purpose, I will analyze the manifestations of the characters’ failure and how they interrupt the hegemonical narrative of Eucharistic success, bringing to the fore truths that question God’s authority and the foundations of the Nine Houses. I will explore three of Halberstam’s proposed “other forms of knowledge” (52): forgetfulness, masochism and immorality.

Through close-reading focused on different characters and events, I will demonstrate how the Christian narrative of ultimate success through the Eucharist is queered in *The Locked Tomb*—where Lyctorhood, shaped after the sacrament, does not culminate in salvation. Instead, it leads the characters to death and pain, and eventually to a dismantling of the Nine Houses' establishment. This affects the religious and political spheres of power, since God is the maximum authority in both (he holds the titles of “Emperor” and “King”; *Gideon* 39). In this chapter, I hope to show how failure challenges the Eucharistic ideas of unity with God and others, since it unveils the actual abyss that separates God, the Lyctors and their dead cavaliers.

3.1 Success, Hegemony and Alternative Forms of Knowledge

To mix the topics of religion and queerness like *The Locked Tomb* does is a contentious and delicate matter. So is, perhaps, to talk about failure as a queer enterprise. What queer person has not experienced the sting of falling short of someone else's expectations? Heirs to a history of oppression and erasure, queer people nowadays are starved for success stories: from the skyrocketing of Chappell Roan's career as an unapologetic lesbian singer to the passing of legislation that gives official recognition to nonbinary genders, queer people wish to see their peers achieving their dreams and publicly asserting their identities. While there is good reason for this, and there can be no denying the benefits of amplifying positive queer narratives, one must also question the parameters which define them as such. What is the measure of success in a cisheterosexual paradigm? Are these queer success stories complying with and validating a set of hegemonical values that have historically oppressed their own community? Scholars like Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz propose that success narratives are coded as inherently cisheterosexual and invite a new reading of failure as queer, meaning not that it inherently implies non-normative genders or sexualities as agents, but that it is a transgression against normativity. They suggest that failure should be reexamined in a positive light because it opens new possibilities and offers alternative ways of knowing and doing in the world.

To understand the reasons for this reframing endeavor, one must be able to situate the success/failure dichotomy within the context of the current hegemony. Borrowing from Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall, Halberstam identifies *hegemony* as a “multilayered system” that grants a group of people dominance over others through the production and transmission of an “interlocking system of ideas” that legitimize them (17). In other words, it is the

perpetuation of a set of ideas that establish and maintain hierarchical relations in society. Narratives of success thus require a high or dominant position in these hierarchies. If history is written by victors, a cursory examination of Western values reveals who shares in this victory and dominates over others in the current social landscape: rich, young, able-bodied, White, Christian, cisheterosexual men. Besides this set of characteristics, Halberstam points to wealth accumulation and reproductive maturity as the main signifiers of success within the capitalist context (2). Put together, these parameters imply that success is, by its very nature, not readily available to those who do not meet these requirements: racial minorities, financially vulnerable communities, women and queer people among them. The degree to which success is available to these communities varies when all the aforementioned parameters are taken into account, considering that different contexts value some of these more than others.

Although at first this might seem inherently negative, failure can hold creative and generative potential when it entails “doing something else”; it can be a refusal to participate in a given system that opens up new possibilities (Muñoz 174). To explore instances of this generative potential, Halberstam advocates for “emancipatory” (14), “undisciplined” (9) or “antidisciplinary” (147) forms of knowledge that have been “disqualified, rendered nonsensical or nonconceptual” (11) by conventional ones which comply with and uphold hegemonical social structures and dynamics. His analysis and examples engage discussions of race and feminism and place them under the umbrella of queer affects through the lens of failure, i.e. transgression of hegemonical narratives.

In exploring transgressions and deviations from hegemonical thinking, Halberstam formulates an escape from the “traps and impasses of binary formulations” (2) that avoids the “normalization, routines, convention, tradition, and regularity” of mainstream academia (7-8). He does so from the starting point of *low theory*, a counterhegemonic approach that is focused on “the detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion” (15). Halberstam’s analysis of both high and low culture to locate instances of failure and their generative potential seems particularly in tune with *The Locked Tomb*, a text that also references widely disparate sources and goes from heartfelt lyricism to Dad jokes within the span of a few lines.

3.2 Queerness as Transgressive Action: Failure, Deviation and Interruption

Abandoning hegemonical parameters of success, effectiveness and practicality yields models of thinking that offer “alternative ways of knowing and being” (Halberstam 24). These have

the potential to “poke holes” at the social fabric and expose its more unpleasant realities (3). Taking this into account, it does not seem a stretch to argue that people who already exist in the fringes, who are by nature transgressive, such as the members of the queer community, may—with different degrees of intentionality—find these alternative models more accessible and intuitive:

Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. *Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well* ... and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon “trying and trying again.” (Halberstam 7; emphasis added)

However, the ties that bind queerness and failure do not derive merely from a fruitful relationship between a specific kind of knowing subject and a particular knowable object. The idea of success/failure as part of the normative/queer paradigm is situated in a scholarly context where queerness transcends simple states of being. As has been mentioned already, in this thesis queerness includes transgressions beyond sexuality and gender. Instead of a set of predefined categories placed opposite the cisheterosexual norm, it is a mode of knowing and doing in the world. Sara Ahmed describes it in spatial terms of dis/orientation that refer to how subjects interact with the objects that surround them. She poses that queerness is a deviation from an inherited “straight line” (67, 85) that determines which objects are within easy reach and what directions are “right and normal” (70). On a larger scale, orientation—or disorientation—is identified as an all-encompassing way to interact with the objects of one’s desire and with the world at large (68). Ahmed uses this theory to discuss matters of sexuality but also race, again expanding the range of queer affects.

Orientations are not only spatial, but they take on a temporal dimension as well: an interaction with an object in the present points the subject toward future orientations (Ahmed 21). Muñoz goes as far as claiming that queerness is stagnant and ultimately compliant with heteronormativity (12) when it is focused on the present moment, which he deems “poisonous and insolvent” (30). This striking position stems from a belief that a queerness rooted in cisheteronormative, “straight time” (22), is ultimately doomed to fall short of its full potential. Instead, he advocates for “a doing for and toward the future” (1), asserting that there is more to be gained from understanding queerness as “not yet here” (22) and “utopian” (26). Just as Halberstam links queerness to an escape from hegemonical narratives, and Ahmed to deviations from the aforementioned straight line, Muñoz advocates for an understanding of

queerness as the interruption of “the spatial/temporal coordinates of straight time” (32). His ideas tie to the opening paragraph in 3.1, where I questioned whether current queer success stories are complying with and validating hegemonical values. Although Muñoz focuses on non-normative genders and sexualities, I believe his theory of queer time aligns with Halberstam’s failure and Ahmed’s disorientations. By extension it can, like the others, be applied to those communities who remain in the fringes of hegemony.

Let us consider an example of one such community. If one revisits the list of success parameters outlined earlier, it is not only genderqueer people who stand outside the normative hegemonical narratives, but women too. Indeed, not only have women been considered to fall short of hegemonical measures of success throughout history, but they have been actively prevented from building and transmitting their own narratives. Halberstam actually addresses a whole chapter to what he calls “shadow feminisms” (4), dedicated to an examination of failure from a feminist lens. In fact, masochism is framed specifically as a feminist tool. For the purpose of my analysis, I have chosen to detach it from this connection due to *The Locked Tomb*’s emphasis on gender transgression, the majority of women/femme characters and the fact that both men and women fail at Lyctorhood. Taking these into account, I do not believe a feminist reading applies to this thesis’ analysis of failure tied to the Eucharist. Still, it is notable that the one character who achieves perfect Lyctorhood and rules the Empire is a man, and a feminist lens would be pertinent in exploring other aspects of the plot.

To summarize my regarding of failure as queer, I am following Halberstam’s assertion that “failure must be located within that range of political affects that we call *queer*” (89) because it interrupts and transgresses against the perpetuation of hegemonical narratives. As I have hopefully clarified above, this does not require that a failing person’s gender or sexuality be non-normative. Although queer identities abound in *The Locked Tomb*, as point 1.4 shows, this thesis is concerned with the nature and implications of failed Lyctorhood as an image of the Eucharist. I consider these queer in that they constitute deviations, interruptions and alternatives to hegemonical (God’s) ways of knowing and doing in the series. The characters’ accumulation of failures results in God’s deception being exposed, which then casts his other actions in a new, more critical light. Harrow, Ianthe and the original Lyctors unknowingly failing to properly complete the ritual elicits questions about the Nine Houses establishment, as well as challenges the Christian idea that the Eucharist is humanity’s ultimate success story. Failed Lyctorhood *queers* Catholic doctrine by challenging the deliverance and communion one is supposed to achieve through its central sacrament, ultimately eliciting

questions about other Catholic tenets. The rest of the chapter will deal with the different expressions of the characters's failure in the books and the ways this failure "poke[s] holes" (Halberstam 3) at the religious and social fabric holding the Empire of the Nine Houses together.

3.3 "Half a Lyctor": Lobotomies, Amputations and Other Interruptions of Eucharistic Success

Muñoz offers different examples of aesthetic and artistic queer practices that hold what he calls "utopian potentiality"; failure is one of them (172-173). Likewise, Halberstam proposes a series of manifestations of failure that disrupt "the smooth operations of the normal and the ordinary" (Halberstam 70); some of them are stupidity, forgetfulness, masochism and immorality. These constitute interruptions of straight time, lines or narratives, and hold generative potential in that they render obsolete one of the essential components of hegemony: transmission. Hegemonical narratives and structures depend on transmission because self-evidence is directly proportional to longevity when it comes to persuading people of "often contradictory" sets of ideas (Halberstam 17). A narrative that is manipulated, forgotten or misunderstood cannot be properly upheld and passed on to peers or offspring; just as an agent who is rendered—or renders themselves—mentally or physically incapable cannot carry out the task of perpetuation either. Similarly, the characters in *The Locked Tomb* express in different ways the imperfect nature of their Lyctoral performance, even before they know it as such.

The following sections will provide a detailed exploration of the generative potential of forgetfulness, masochism and immorality in the series, analyzing excerpts that illustrate these manifestations of the characters' failure. This has the aim of demonstrating the queering of Lyctorhood, and subsequently of the Eucharist, which turns from a narrative of salvation into one of guilt, harm and loss. In the process, it opens alternative ways of considering the questionable motives and values that underlie the Nine Houses hegemony. Said hegemony requires that Lyctors fight God's enemies in an astral plane of reality called the River. When their souls access it, their bodies are left behind in the physical world, powered with the "blank energy that had once been their cavalier" (*Harrow* 145). In theory, this means that their bodies are still able to heal and protect themselves with their late cavaliers' swordsmanship. The reality is somewhat different for Ianthe and Harrow, whose partial or total failure to achieve this belies the inherently imperfect nature of their Lyctorhood.

3.3.1 Forgetfulness

Memory is, according to Muñoz, “most certainly constructed and, more important, always political” (35). As a mechanism of power that confines conventional knowledge to a selected set of narratives it deems important, it in turn establishes precedents for future acts of remembrance (Halberstam 15). Memory casts its gaze towards the past, but its actions remain rooted in the present and its intentions point toward the future. The current tendency toward a skewed nostalgia is but an expression of the dangers of memory when put in service of hegemonical powers. The *tradwife* trend on TikTok, “Make America Great Again” and other similar slogans being used by far-right movements worldwide, all express a longing for the past that ignores the harmful realities that came with it, and so one must wonder who profits from the promotion of these nostalgic narratives. In Ahmed’s words: “In the face of what appears, we must ask what disappears” (90). Who stands to gain from a return to traditional gender roles that confine women to housework? Whose success is ensured with the overthrowing of modern laws that ensure safety and equity for minorities? The answer is, again: rich, young, able-bodied, White, Christian, cisheterosexual men.¹¹ Memory thus becomes contested ground, for just as the hegemonical social order benefits from promoting a particular set of narratives, one can opt to rescue and highlight those that shatter the illusion of the good old days. Another option is to simply forget “in order to start from a new place ... where the new begins afresh, unfettered by memory, tradition and usable pasts” (Halberstam 70).

Forgetfulness constitutes a clear example of the interruption of a narrative and therefore has the potential to dig up alternative forms of existence, death, time and truth (Halberstam 55). These alternatives come to the forefront in *Harrow*, which revolves around the title character’s memory loss. Although readers are aware that she misremembers the events in *Gideon*, the reasons and extent of this forgetfulness remain mysterious through most of the book. Discovering exactly what, how and why she has forgotten contributes to bringing forth

¹¹ The emphasis on class and wealth, here, cannot be overstated. A core aspect of these nostalgic narratives is that they disguise themselves as accessible and desirable for the lower social strata. In reality, it is they who have benefited most from social progress policies such as the participation of women in the workforce. Although *Nona* touches on the effects of class and wealth, these are unrelated to the Eucharistic narrative of Lyctorhood, and therefore are not further addressed in this thesis.

the truth of God's deception, shaking the foundations of the Nine Houses and, by extension, questioning the Eucharistic promise of salvation detailed in the previous chapter.

Harrow alternates between the narrative present, where newly ascended Lyctors are being trained to face off God's enemies, and Harrow's memories of her time in the First House, supposedly corresponding to the events that take place in *Gideon*. The false quality of these memories is clear to readers from the start, however: instead of Gideon, she seems to think it was Ortus—the original, middle-aged Ninth House cavalier—who traveled with her to complete the Lyctoral trials and eventually sacrificed himself for her sake. Although Harrow is unaware that her memories have been tampered with for most of the book, she knows that something has happened to her beyond ascension to Lyctorhood, and her memories are haunted by other characters questioning if that is “how it happens” (*Harrow* 23, 115, 132, 184, 204, 237, 371, 374). In a letter to herself that “cannot answer questions”, past-Harrow mentions “the work” (59) that has killed her and given birth to a new self with limited access to “the Lyctoral well” (60). She clearly states that whatever happened was fully intentional:

Understand that I envy you more than I have ever envied anyone, and that I look upon your birth as a blessing. Look upon me as a Harrowhark who was handed the first genuine choice of our lives; the only choice ever given where we had free will to say, No, and free will to say, Yes.

Accept that in this instance I have chosen to say, No. (*Harrow* 61)

This goes directly against God's plan and the intended development of the Eucharistic narrative of Lyctorhood. Right after her ascension, God claims that he cannot fight the Nine Houses' enemies alone and expresses his wish that Harrow will “learn to be [his] Hand” because “the Empire needs another saint, more than ever” (*Gideon* 443). Although initially Harrow agrees to this, her later actions are a direct act of disobedience that halts the Lyctoral process.

The consequences of Harrow's choice become obvious early on. She is an incomplete Lyctor who cannot come into her full power: “I must have misapprehended the process. I am half a Lyctor. I am nothing, I am pointless, I am unmanned” (*Harrow* 45). Ianthe demonstrates the difference in their necromantic abilities by stabbing both her hand and Harrow's. While Ianthe's wound instantly “knitted together as though it were nothing ... leaving her palm whole and unblemished”, Harrow needs “embarrassing torrents” of power to accomplish the same (66). Technically, Harrow's limited powers do not hinder her extended lifespan: “As your life may hopefully now extend into the myriads” (59). However, her claim to eternal life

is not without challenges. Harrow's deficiencies make her a liability in the eyes of one of the original Lyctors, Gideon the First, who attempts to kill her several times because he believes her a danger to God. Due to her memory loss, Lyctorhood is no longer synonymous with power nor with eternal life for Harrow; instead, she finds herself helpless and in graver mortal danger than ever.

The nature of the work remains mysterious until chapter 43, where Harrow's memory is finally restored, allowing her to explain her past-self's actions. Given that one of the steps to Lyctorhood is to "*analyse* [the soul]—understand its structure, its shape" (*Gideon* 383), Harrow attempts to preserve Gideon's soul by forgetting her:

I knew she would be absorbed. I understood that I would inadvertently destroy her soul—the process was already underway. But it hadn't finished. I had time. I decided to remove my ability to so incorporate her... by removing my ability to comprehend her ... I took the part of my brain that remembered her... that understood her soul... and I disconnected it. Then I made rather crude systems—so as not to be accidentally reminded. (*Harrow* 382)

In her grief, Harrow decides that forgetfulness is the only path to peace with herself: in Halberstam's words, it allows her "a free space of reinvention, a new narrative of self and other" (60). Lyctorhood, which had been the ultimate aspiration of her life, is no longer a viable, positive option, and so she is forced to look for alternative ways of existing, doing and knowing.

3.3.2 Masochism and Illness

Another possible avenue for counterhegemonic knowledge is to speak "the language of self-destruction" (Halberstam 124), i.e., to render oneself physically incapable of carrying on the transmission of hegemonic narratives and values. Halberstam states that masochism is a path to renegotiating the relationships "between self and other, self and technology, self and power" (135); I would extend this potential to other ruptures with bodily integrity, such as sickness and chronic or temporary physical impairments. With health and able-bodiedness as measures of success, these may constitute queer ways of being and doing which can provide the necessary alternatives to challenge hegemonical narratives. Given that immortality and magical healing are part of the deal the characters strike in *The Locked Tomb*, it is interesting to examine how far Lyctors actually are from perfect health. The previous section illustrated the psychological aspect of imperfect Lyctorhood and its consequences. Here, I turn to the physical expressions of this failure.

For a process that is supposed to ensure a person's bodily integrity for all eternity, there is a distinct aspect of brokenness to Lyctorhood. Harrow describes it to Ianthe as follows: "You know what it is ... to be—fractured" (*Harrow* 362). Although she says this in reference to their Lyctoral nature and the amalgamation of souls it entails, Ianthe presents a tangible example of this fracture. During the confrontation against Cytherea at the end of *Gideon*, Ianthe loses her right arm, which God has replaced with a donor's by the time *Harrow* starts. Although the limb is "very nicely matched to the original" (146), something seems to be wrong with it—Ianthe is incapable of using it properly and therefore cannot wield a sword when her soul travels to the River. As time passes, she begins to favor her left arm, relying less on the attached limb, which is described as "too heavy a burden" (61), "strangely flopsome" (63), "abandoned" (102), "fat and swollen and unused" (146) and a "weak point" (165).

There seems to be a certain intentionality behind the failed transplant. Augustine, one of the original Lyctors, claims that the problem is "psychological" and that Ianthe "persist[s] in being damaged for [her] own enjoyment" (*Harrow* 149). Indeed, the attached limb is perfectly usable, yet it remains a foreign entity for Ianthe. When asked for the reasons why she refuses to use her right arm, she replies succinctly: "It's not mine" (149). In this way, she actively rejects the tools that would make her a proper Lyctor, a "channel" or "repository" (Halberstam 135) for the realization of God's plan. It is not a triumphant refusal, however, for it puts her in a position of vulnerability and contempt in the eyes of the original Lyctors, similar even if not as marked as Harrow's. Given an ultimatum by Augustine—that she either fix herself or abandon her training—Ianthe resorts to a radical solution and decides to sever the faulty limb. Harrow accidentally finds her attempting this:

She sprawled in a puddle of red as though it was her shadow. Her long hair tumbled over her face and shoulders like a veil, and she grunted hard through her teeth, breathing in long terrible breaths like a dying animal. As you watched—a silent spectator on her mattress—she propped herself on her elbows and grasped the ruddy crimson blade of her trident knife in both hands, and she thrust it furiously into the intolerable seam of her right arm.

Ianthe struck again and again. *The wound kept healing over—the skin sewed itself back up even as she pulled the blade away.* Blood coalesced around the seam in a serried row of teeth, of needles, and these she used to try to lever herself apart, but her elbow wobbled beneath her and she collapsed on the sodden carpet. She dropped the knife from nerveless fingers. She slapped that almost-imperceptible seam, then again. Then she gave a low and broken moan, and fell over onto her side, curled foetally inward. (*Harrow* 241; emphasis added)

As shown in the italicized text, Ianthe's Lyctoral healing powers are the obstacle that stands between her and the desired pain and unbecoming. Outside intervention is necessary to fulfill her wish: Harrow severs the limb in a single stroke and grows her a new, skeletal arm that Ianthe is finally able to use. It is unclear what Ianthe's plan had been if she had succeeded without Harrow accidentally finding her, considering that Ianthe claims she cannot rebuild herself a substitute because she will "leave something out" and "if it's not perfect it won't work, and [she] won't want it" (*Harrow* 149). In any case, the young Lyctor finds it preferable to make her fractured inner self a visible reality, rather than accept the foreign attachment that has been thrust upon her. For the duration of this scene, she fully embodies the "messy, bloody, porous, violent, and self-loathing" (Halberstam 135) subject that refuses coherence and instead inserts herself into a "spiral of pain and hurt" (144).

Ianthe is not the only character to suffer from physical impairments, nor to be betrayed by her healing abilities. Cytherea, the rogue Lyctor who attempted to kill the necromancers and cavaliers in *Gideon*, is another interesting example. Before Lyctorhood, she suffered from a severe form of blood cancer and was "barely alive" (*Harrow* 120). Her cavalier thought ascending would cure her and ensure her survival; instead, she was given the ability to regenerate at a rate enough to preserve her life—she "just kept dying" and was "in a terrific amount of pain for the last myriad" (*Gideon* 403). Cytherea's condition seems to also result in a heavier conscience; even though her cavalier "went willingly" (*Gideon* 421), she appears tormented by her past choices: "We had the choice to stop" (*Harrow* 121). Cytherea's unease makes her question God and eventually leads her to become the first to learn of God's deception. As a consequence, she decides to disrupt the Lyctoral trials by murdering the candidates so as to deprive God of more Lyctors, with the ultimate aim of killing him. Her death at the end of *Gideon* stops her from succeeding and from revealing what she knows to the other Lyctors.

3.3.3 Immorality

Not all modes of failure are as sympathetic or as easily commiserated with as the ones commented on thus far; in fact, some may be uncomfortable to admit and examine. Yet only through awareness of *all* forms of failure can one truly find alternative paths to those promoted by hegemonical paradigms. As scholars, activists and individuals attempt to build a body of antidisiplinary knowledge, they also "bury" certain narratives in favor of those "that please" (Halberstam 148). In other words, within a particular canon rooted in

counterhegemonic thought, success parameters also work to uphold certain narratives and silence or discard others by creating (and often negating the existence of) new hierarchies based on, for example, the age of queer individuals, the race of women, the able-bodiedness of Black people, etc. Acknowledging the existence of these success/failure narratives prevents the establishment of new oppressive dynamics and continues the work of challenging hegemony. Therefore, just as forgetting and misunderstanding can be avenues for counterhegemonic knowledge, historical examination (whether on a social or personal level) and critical thinking may also stall the perpetuation of constricting narratives of success. Halberstam does this by exploring instances of moral failure in the gay community—an endeavor that could be extended to problematic episodes in the history of all minorities. An analysis of these episodes of immorality risks being wielded as justification for oppression yet problematizing a more comfortable “narrative of victimization” (151) and rejecting the “linear connections between radical desires and radical politics” (171) is necessary to reevaluate the queer potential of failure. In Ahmed’s words, one must “avoid assuming that ‘deviation’ is always on ‘the side’ of the progressive” (174).

This problematization of counterhegemonic narratives is relevant for an analysis of Lyctorhood. As sympathetic as the Lyctors’ plight may seem, that they have reached their current state through murder and consumption is an unignorable fact. The analysis below will show that the Lyctoral process is repeatedly presented as morally reproachable by most of the characters, and that awareness of their own immorality is key to them breaking away from hegemony, i.e., God’s intended plan. Awareness of one’s own moral failures is essential to fully queer the Eucharistic narrative of Lyctorhood or to otherwise stay complicit with it. When regarded as a Eucharistic image, the immorality inherent to Lyctorhood adds another layer of queerness, of deviation from the hegemonic Christian narrative of success, further turning a site of virtue and community into one of sin and death. Having this in mind and following the previous sections’ examples of psychological and physical impairments interfering in God’s project for the Lyctors, this one will examine the characters’ moral considerations of Lyctorhood.

First, it is interesting to note that, although the Nine Houses seemingly hold conventional values and ideas regarding the taking of another person’s life, the Lyctoral process occurs outside the limits of their laws:

“We are in a sacred space. Imperial law is based on the writ of the Emperor, and here the Emperor is the only law. No writ, no interpretation. I gave you his rule. There is no other.”

“But natural law—the laws against murder and theft. What prevents us from stealing one another’s keys through intimidation, blackmail, or deception? ...”

... “Nothing.” (*Gideon* 238-239)

Therefore, Lyctorhood is legal, perhaps even ethical if one believes God and considers the greater good of the Nine Houses, but not moral, as shown by the characters’ reticence and revulsion when faced with the truth of it. Before they discover the sacrifice and consumption involved in Lyctorhood, the process and its moral implications are foreshadowed in one of the necromantic abilities, *siphoning*, which the Sixth House specializes in. Cytherea explains it thus: “When Master Octakiserson siphons his cavalier, he sends the soul elsewhere and then exploits the space it leaves behind” (*Gideon* 221). One of the tasks necromancers face in the First House requires them to turn this siphoning from the empty space to the actual soul of the cavalier—the Lyctoral process stripped to its most basic fact of spiritual consumption. It is rather telling, then, that Palamedes, despite his wish to become a Lyctor, adamantly refuses to attempt this: “When I told him the method, he said he’d never do it ... He won’t siphon” (220-221). Harrow is hesitant yet eventually succeeds at the task. Upon seeing her do so, Palamedes declares: “It’s not good theory and it’s not good morals” (309). Cytherea calls the skill “unholy” (339) and claims that God “did say that siphoning was the most dangerous thing any House had ever thought up, and ought only to be done with the siphoner in cuffs” (340). After learning of God’s deception, this raises the question whether his judgement stems from fear that siphoners might have better chances of reaching perfect Lyctorhood. In any case, it is clear that siphoning, which heralds the process taking place in Lyctorhood, is a contentious subject among necromancers.

As has been mentioned before, once the reality of Lyctoral ascension is revealed in *Gideon*, it ceases to be aspirational for most of the characters. Instead, the remaining necromancers severely reject and condemn it. After Ianthe explains how she killed and ate her cavalier, Silas calls her “heretic”, sentences her to death and suggests that others outside this limited circle would also find Lyctorhood reprehensible: “I will cleanse everything here, Ninth, to stop the Houses from finding out how we have debased ourselves” (386). Palamedes claims he had parsed the process like Ianthe but had discarded his conclusions as “ghastly” (383) and reaffirms his stance against using his cavalier’s soul: “I wouldn’t have done that to Camilla”

(402). His reticence is seen as admirable by Harrow, who later condemns her and Ianthe's Lyctorhood: "I may have been Sextus's necromantic superior; but he was the better man ... You embody the worst flaws of your House—as do I" (*Harrow* 362).

These moral considerations carry on throughout *Harrow* with Lyctorhood being repeatedly deemed an "indelible sin" (53). That several cavaliers volunteered to be killed and consumed does not necessarily ease the minds of the Lyctors, as shown by Cytherea's torment and Harrow's self-inflicted amnesia. Mercymorn and Augustine, present a similar case: although it is hinted that their cavaliers also sacrificed themselves to push them toward Lyctorhood, both still think of the fact as murder ("You watched us kill our cavaliers in cold blood"; *Harrow* 481). In contrast, Ianthe seems to be the only one with a clear conscience. When the other necromancers find the newly ascended Lyctor, she welcomes them wholly unrepentant: "My cavalier is dead, and I killed him. Please don't misunderstand, this isn't a confession" (*Gideon* 381). Contrary to the others' fond and regretful memories of their cavaliers, Ianthe continuously scorns hers: "I don't care about Babs" (*Harrow* 67), "I'm using Babs as a butt puppet" (*Nona* 324). Rather tellingly, she finds the murder involved in Lyctorhood justified because it is part of God's plan:

Palamedes said, vaguely, "This can't be right."

"Of course it's right, goosey, the Emperor himself helped come up with it."
(*Gideon* 385)

This same justification seems to fuel Ianthe's actions at the end of *Harrow*, when she "throw[s] in her lot with the guy who had lied to everyone about everything" (*Harrow* 499). Is this attitude born of real faith or of a self-serving misplacement of responsibility? Regardless of her motivations, her refusal to acknowledge the immorality of her actions results in her becoming the one character to remain complicit in God's plan. Being a victim of the masochism and physical impairments that manifest the failed nature of her Lyctorhood is not enough for Ianthe to deviate from hegemony since it is not paired with the moral qualms the other Lyctors experience. In contrast, the rest does not shy away from their moral responsibility, and consequently they are "unsettled" (Halberstam 171) by the problematic implications of God's demands, eventually embracing a queer, counterhegemonic path: throughout *Nona*, they ally themselves with God's enemies and actively seek his death.

3.4 Imperfect Lyctorhood, or a Failed Eucharist

As the above analysis of the instances of forgetfulness, bodily harm and moral considerations in *The Locked Tomb* shows, the revelation that there is such a thing as a perfect and an imperfect Lyctorhood situates these difficulties as manifestations of the characters' failure. Although the ritual involved in perfect Lyctorhood is not described, it is known that ultimately it does not require the bodily sacrifice of the cavalier. Instead, both necromancer and cavalier achieve a balanced exchange of energy that grants them truly boundless power and their lives become entangled—one's death cannot happen without the other's. God himself has achieved this; before, he was just a man. As of the end of *Nona*, it is unclear to what extent the nature and identity of his cavalier play a part in making him more powerful than the other Lyctors. At any rate, what is sure is that perfect Lyctorhood would have granted Harrow, Ianthe and the others more powers than they have without killing their cavaliers. Instead, they partake in a failed Eucharistic ritual with direct consequences to their mental and physical wellbeing as well as their moral integrity. In the process, they discover that the Nine Houses' establishment rests on false premises.

Although Ianthe's and Cytherea's conditions raise questions about the extent of God's powers and his motivations, the breaking of Harrow's self-imposed mental barrier is the ultimate catalyst for *Harrow's* main revelations. First, that Gideon's soul has effectively survived and remains unabsorbed within her. This does not imply she "misapprehended the process" (*Harrow* 45) as the characters initially believe, since upon remembering Gideon she finally obtains full access to her Lyctoral powers. Second, and the explanation for Harrow's sudden change in powers, is that she is one step closer to God's perfect Lyctorhood. The only reason Lyctors are not "as powerful or eternal" (*Gideon* 446) as God is that they were pushed toward a faulty process. Considering that the ritual entails the sacrifice and consumption of a loved one, God's deception hurts his "fingers and gestures" (*Harrow* 13) deeply; they realize that they are one body with God in name only. The third revelation, although minor in comparison to the others, is still significant when considering the Eucharistic reading of Lyctorhood: God had ordered Gideon the First to "either fix or put down Harrow" (490), and therefore he is ultimately responsible for the attempts on her life. Additionally, the confirmation that God is not the divine entity from Christian theology but originally an ordinary man situates Lyctorhood as a man-made process.

After these truths come to light, Lyctorhood becomes a site for betrayal, rejection and death, in contrast with the ultimate state of closeness with God and ensuing eternal life the Eucharist entails. Harrow, Ianthe and Cytherea do, with different degrees of consciousness and intentionality, choose to stray from the given path and manifest the failure they had been pushed toward. Forgetfulness, bodily harm and immorality are failures in the eyes of the cisheterosexual hegemony described earlier in this chapter. As such, they work to find an alternative to the hegemonical narrative that deems Lyctorhood the most desirable outcome for any necromancer. The existence of perfect Lyctorhood renders moot the benefits of the imperfect process: great power, immortality and closeness to God are not enough to compensate for the losses and deception the characters have had to withstand.

This chapter has shown how participation in a Eucharistic ritual is far from beneficial for the characters by applying a success/failure paradigm to the analysis of Lyctorhood. The possibility of a failed ritual constitutes a queer/transgressive way of knowing and doing in *The Locked Tomb* that dismantles the universe's establishment: it reveals that God was originally a man and that the Empire is built on his lies. Therefore, when read as a Eucharistic narrative, this dismantling encompasses Catholic doctrine as well, bringing into question the promise of salvation through the consumption of Jesus' sacrificial body.

4 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to identify how the first three novels of Tamsyn Muir's *The Locked Tomb* queer Catholic doctrine by introducing a success/failure dichotomy into a Eucharistic narrative, Lyctorhood. I first detailed the queer identities present in the series to highlight the queer lens from which it portrays religion. I then delved into the theological context of the Eucharist, outlining its scriptural basis and ritual elements, which are emulated in the Lyctoral process that grants immortality through sacrifice and consumption. An in-depth exploration of the concept of transubstantiation and its representation in the novels identified them as specifically Catholic. This chapter also highlighted the aspect of amalgamation or unity through the Eucharist, one that is echoed in the soul incorporation involved in Lyctorhood as well as in the Lyctors' proximity to God. I also provided other examples of religious references to illustrate the extent of the series' engagement with Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular.

Chapter Two followed with an explanation of Halberstam's theory of queer failure, which was compared to Muñoz's queer temporality and Ahmed's dis/orientations. Although these scholars illustrate their theories mostly with examples concerning gender and sexuality, they contemplate a queerness that encompasses all those actions that fail at, interrupt or deviate from hegemonical narratives, and this is the definition I have employed. Once the theoretical framework was established, I provided a detailed analysis of the characters' failure in *The Locked Tomb*, whose forgetfulness, masochism and immorality keep God's plan from successful completion. Inasmuch as Lyctorhood is an image of the Eucharist, which in turn is the utmost Christian narrative of success available to all who wish to partake, the introduction of a failure/success paradigm unsettles the very foundations of the sacrament. Where the Eucharist is the door to eternal life, Lyctorhood means "to walk with the dead forever ... to make yourself a tomb" (*Gideon* 385).

The characters' manifestations of failure also constitute alternative forms of knowledge that raise doubts about the Nine Houses' hegemony and serve to uncover God's true nature and intentions. Instead of the deity in Christian theology, he is revealed to be an ordinary human with extraordinary powers. This reduces the Nine Houses' existence and purpose from divine will to the egotistical whims of a man. The fallibility of Lyctorhood, a Eucharistic narrative, can thus be traced back to its human origin. This is an apt reminder that Catholicism, and in general all religions, are ultimately human institutions, constituted and performed by and for

humans, despite their divine intentions and aspirations. As such, they bear critical examination, just as any other hegemonical set of ideas. The problematization of Eucharistic principles through failed Lyctorhood in *The Locked Tomb* invites a consideration of the sacrament in the Church today. Its limitations, directives and dogmas are not and should not be unquestionable. One might examine, for example, who describes and performs the sacrament and who is allowed to partake in it. If the “sum and summary” (*Catechism* 1327) of the Catholic faith can be queered, what tenet may go unchallenged? Can we not question any and all of the Church’s systems of power which establish hierarchies that are maintained through hegemonical narratives of success?

By transgressing one of the central tenets of Catholicism and by virtue of the widespread queer identities in the narrative, *The Locked Tomb* effectively weaves religion and queerness. While its transgressive effort warns against the perils of blindly following an institution subject to human fallibility, the novels do not negate the divine, amalgamating power of the Eucharist. It just is not represented by God’s self-proclaimed perfect Lyctorhood, which both necromancer and cavalier survive and benefit from. The Eucharist, in contrast, is a commemoration of Jesus’ sacrifice. It is the highest expression of divine love; there is no Eucharist without death. And so, I would argue that it is the character of Paul who embodies the truest Eucharistic narrative of all, with Camilla and Palamedes fusing their souls to form a new one. Who they were is dead but simultaneously lives on, deeply transformed: they are “the love that is perfected by death” (*Nona* 424). Their birth so late in the books is the reason why this third version of Lyctorhood has not been touched on in this thesis; its significance remains to be seen in the conclusion of the series. Still, I would venture that theirs is the most accurate representation of the Eucharistic promise of transformation, unity and salvation.

The fact that *The Locked Tomb* is currently an unfinished series has been a significant limitation for this thesis. On the one hand, there is no telling how the final book will continue after the discovery of God’s human nature nor what the consequences for the Nine Houses’ establishment will be. Just as the character of Paul may reveal new layers of Eucharistic transgression, the full counterhegemonic potential of the characters’ failure remains to be explored. On the other hand, as mentioned in the introduction, the fact that the series is so

recent has translated into a lack of academic criticism on the books.¹² It is possible that once the conclusion to the series has been published, there will be further research on *The Locked Tomb*, as the narrative's length and complexity lends itself nicely to scholarly work.

My focus has been on the Eucharistic nature of Lyctorhood; however, I pointed out that other sacraments are represented in *The Locked Tomb*. Further research could be done on the series' representation of Penance, which is another point of intersection between Catholic doctrine and queerness. As section 2.2 briefly addressed, Harrow is moved to confession by guilt over her own nature (being the product of her parents' genocide) and her actions (having opened the Tomb). This representation of Penance may resonate with the weaponization of the sacrament against the queer community. However, these scenes constitute, first, a turning point in Gideon and Harrow's relationship, and second, a declaration of love for the woman that lies in the Tomb. I expect these sapphic implications yield points of queer liberation and transgression of the sacrament's doctrine similar to those outlined in this thesis.

Representations of devotion would also be interesting to analyze, as it is a central theme in the series and one where romance and religion are closely tied. Interpersonal devotion in *The Locked Tomb* is a dynamic force that moves the characters' relationships and transformations; in its religious aspect, it keeps the Nine Houses hegemony stale and unchanging. It is possible that the fourth and final book will introduce new aspects of queered Catholicism to be examined. Postcolonial and ecocritical criticism could also be applied to readings of the series. The first would be useful in analyzing the Empire of the Nine Houses, which invades other planets for their resources and forces the displacement of local populations. The second might be combined with feminist theory for an examination of the character of Alecto, who is both God's cavalier and a personification of the Earth. Although *Nona* explains the circumstances of her birth, it is expected that the fourth and final book will delve deeper into her character, and therefore more material will be available for academic criticism on this topic in the future.

"One flesh, one end" is the core of the necromancer-cavalier bond, an announcement of what is to come in Lyctorhood that echoes 1 Cor. 10.16, "We who are many are one body". A phrase that supposedly summarizes and hails the relationship between necromancer and

¹² I would therefore like to acknowledge again the work of the online fan community, who analyze and theorize about *The Locked Tomb* insightfully and passionately. Their posts have been a source of inspiration, good help in identifying some of the biblical references and a constant reminder of the joy these books bring to my life.

cavalier, simultaneously representing Eucharistic unity, is corrupted in imperfect Lyctorhood. For the failed ritual does not entail a shared flesh and a shared end: necromancers keep one while cavaliers meet the other. Yet the faith, devotion and sacrifice the oath encapsulates are what guides the characters' forgetfulness, masochism and immorality toward alternatives to God's given path. Ultimately, "One flesh, one end" acknowledges both the tension of multiplicity and the aspiration of oneness, and as such I believe it to be a deeply queer and Eucharistic sentiment.

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