Contesting Binarisms in *Harry Potter*: Creative Rejigging, or Gender Tokenism?

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Abstract
This paper arises out of curiosity inspired by four Japanese women students' consumption in *English* of the entire Harry Potter series (five increasingly lengthy books, in 2003), and it asks whether the six novels are regressive or creative on gender grounds. In a series which pivots around binaries (Muggles and non-Muggles; Death-Eaters and benign wizards; Slytherin and Griffindor; Potter and Malfoy etc.) and rarely complicates them, does gender come in for the same treatment? In updating the schoolboy/schoolgirl and action/magic genres and locating them in a co-ed setting, does Rowling write as a woman (in the sense that Culler (1982) and Kristeva (1986) define), or does she cling to regressive gender scripts?

Context
My interest in the Harry Potter series¹ was stirred when I was asked to mark a set of vacation exercises designed to be more intellectually challenging than grammar exercises for the most competent group of first year students at Kobe College, a small and somewhat select women's Christian university in Nishinomiya, Japan. They had been required to choose a novel to review: any one, so long as it was in English. Many of these students, for whom English is a second language chose short and undemanding novels, or sometimes avoided reading by choosing a book-linked film. It emerged, however, that three of them had read the entire five volumes of Harry Potter in English (with occasional reference to Japanese translations which
theys_ were critical of), and the other intended to complete the series. The latest 870-page volume, *Phoenix*, had been released in June 2003 and read by two of them by August. It had not yet been released in Japanese. To have attempted to read (and in two cases read in full) such a lengthy series is an extraordinary achievement for second-language learners, especially given that it was a voluntary commitment. Indeed, invited to form groups with names chosen from English Literature, three of the addicts chose to call themselves the Harry Potters, and, in the smaller community comprising myself and the committed students, they referred to themselves (affectionately) as Pottermaniacs, Potterheads, or Potheads. These students belonged to a class who were coping with difficulty with a literary textbook (McRae and Pantaleoni 1990) designed for second-language learners, and who, for example, needed at least two weeks to study a page of admittedly difficult Dickens.

I became curious about what could enable these students to read these books compulsively, and whether the compulsion was of a piece with a phenomenon which had disturbed me in Japan: something I had come to label as female infantilisation. I observed women for whom femininity was a dirty word, barely understood and associated with aggression and un-Japanese female behaviours; women who had no career ambitions and expressed no inhibition about discussing their ambition to marry rich men(!); women who chose to act, speak and dress in ways which in my Australian culture seemed childish, and naïve; classrooms featured Beatrix Potter consumer goods; mobile phones, handbags and backpacks with stuffed animals hanging off them. My four informants did not fit this stereotype, but I wondered if reading Harry Potter was part of the same constellation of behaviours. How were they reading gender? And more fundamentally, how did Rowling present gender issues? This paper emerged from this curiosity, and is founded in an admiration for the architectural quality of Rowling’s design and her articulation of it, but also in misgivings about aspects of the enterprise, especially with how Rowling deals with gender.

A feature of the Harry Potter series is that it mobilises binary structures and essentialist thinking very insistently, and the question arises as to whether gender is similarly binarised. Muggles are a race apart from non-Muggles, opposed in their disposition towards magic and imagination (Le Lvier 2003), ignoring it ‘even if it’s staring them in the face’ (Chamber 34). More insidiously and regressively, she utilises unscientific and outmoded race-theory jargon when she refers to Muggle/non-Muggle using the metaphor of blood. Within the magic world, the most contentious ongoing debate is between ‘pure-bloods’ and ‘mud-bloods’ (2: 149–50), and while the offensively named ‘mudbloods’, those of mixed Muggle/non-Muggle parentage, continually demonstrate their wizard credentials by their behaviour and skills in magic, they nonetheless continually have to fight for their right to exist in the magic world against ‘pure-bloods’ who themselves are remarkably susceptible to Dark Forces. The binaries proliferate, more insistently in the earlier than the later novels, and are rarely complicated: Death Eaters are diametrically different from benign wizards; Slytherin House members, symbolised by the serpent, are constituted in contradistinction from the lion-hearts of Gryffindor; Potter is almost a different animal from Malfoy, and so on. Each element of this binary structure occupies moral and psychological paradigms which are, mostly, mutually exclusive.

While it is premature, indeed risky, to speculate about Rowling’s plans for the remaining novel in the series, there are some indications that this binary structure might be challenged in interesting ways: Dumbledore’s commitment to forgiveness and second chances suggests that evil is not conceived deterministically; Hermione is committed to a critique of power; and most importantly, Harry and his arch-antagonist, Lord Voldemort, share more than superficial character traits. Riddle, Voldemort’s younger self, emphasises this:

...there are strange likenesses between us, Harry Potter. Even you must have noticed. Both half-bloods, orphans, raised by Muggles. Probably the only two Parselmouths to come to Hogwarts since the great Slytherin himself.

We even look something alike ... But after all, it was merely a lucky chance that saved you from me.

(Chamber 233)

When, in despair, Harry calls for help (‘Help me, help me […] someone, anyone’, Chamber 235), he is counter-intuitively, admittedly unwittingly, assisted by the blinded Basilisk, the creature under the control of Voldemort – ‘The Basilisk had swept the Sorting Hat into Harry’s arms’ (ibid), to furnish Godric Gryffindor’s sword. There is a tension at the heart of this binary. Although Harry has the potential to become like Voldemort (Le Lvier 2003), his scar being the barometer of his connectedness to Voldemort (Goblet 522), and he has the capacity to form unexpected bonds with
Given the insistent mobilisation of binaries in Rowling’s texts, does gender come in for the same treatment? In updating the schoolboy/schoolgirl and action/magic genres and locating them in a co-ed setting, does Rowling write as a woman (in the sense that Culler (1982) and Kristeva (1986) define) and with a consciousness of the revolution in gender thinking that has occurred in second-wave feminism, or does she cling to regressive gender scripts? Rowling’s texts do not generate easy answers to these questions, and this paper seeks to examine gender symmetries/asymmetries in the ways in which gender is represented, and aims to demonstrate that, although there is some playful updating and unsettling of the generic models and stereotypic gender representations, and more in the fifth and sixth volumes than in earlier ones, that the novels do not constitute a serious engagement with postmodern gender theory or literary practices, even taking into account the primary audience to which she addresses herself, the child reader, that in gender terms they are regressive.

The next section of the paper raises questions about the gendered nature of Rowling’s intertexts and the ways in which they predetermine gender scripts. The third examines, in a broad way, the representation of women and questions of gender asymmetry in the ritual hero-testing action climaxes of each novel. It demonstrates a possible sea-change in Phoenix, not strongly-sustained in Prince, which is complicated by Hermione’s centrality to plot imperatives and by Rowling’s rewriting of the hero paradigm. The final section deals in finer detail, and more tellingly, with Rowling’s gender scripting in the areas of family, sexuality and romance, and with telling silences (for example, homosexuality and embodiment) in the novels. Jonathan Culler’s challenges to the idea of reading as a ‘gender-neutral’ activity (Culler 1982) applies not only to female readers, but also, and more pointedly, to female writers (Kristeva 1986). Not only readers can be unconscious of their ‘immasculation’ (Fetterley 1977), their tendencies to internalise a male point of view, even a misogynist one, but female writers can be thoroughly immasculated as well. Being female is not a guarantee of gender consciousness (Felman 1993); that depends on the reader’s/writer’s ability to acknowledge those forces, including gender typologies, which construct us before we have the capacity to read them critically. My case is that the novels, even including Phoenix, which is the most radical Harry Potter text to date in its demonstration of awareness of gender.
issues, accept as natural, indeed normative and legitimate, a system of gender values now widely regarded as regressive.

Since early second-wave feminism, and Merlin Stone's groundbreaking (but not especially scholarly) reclamation and rewriting of creation myths from many cultures, there has been much critical scrutiny by scholars (among them, Condren 1989, Frymer-Kensky 1992, Larrington 1992, Lauter 1984, Lauter and Schreier 1985, Lerner 1986, Sanday 1981, Sjöö 1988, Stuckey 1998, Walker 1983), children's literature specialists and writers (Murray et al. 1986, Nikolajeva 2000, Stephens 2002, Trits 1997, Zipes 1983), of previously unnoticed systematic bias in fairytales and myths towards masculinist paradigms (many by gender-conscious men like Zipes or Stephens). At its most creative, partnerships between scholars (often ones who have been unaware of their male biases) and feminist storytellers, like, for example, the one between the Sumerologist Samuel Noah Kramer and feminist story-teller Diane Wolkstein (1983), have resulted in radical new readings of the Gilgamesh/Inanna constellation of Sumerian myths, which have effected a gender sea-change in Sumerology in its many disciplinary manifestations in religious studies, archaeology, history and literary studies. More recently, studies of masculinities (for example Connell 1995, Kimmel 1995, Messner 1997), drawing heavily on feminist theory, have problematized representational issues which relate to men. It would seem, though, that until volume 5, Phoenix, and debatably even then, gender theory and its application in her own corpus have not been issues which have much troubled Rowling, or are likely to bother her child readers. Maleness in these novels is the normative way of being human. Nikolajeva's analyses of characterisation techniques in children's novels reveal 'masculine patterns' to be the 'default' value in children's literature generally, and points out the 'double oppress[ion]' of girls, as women and as children (Nikolajeva, 2001). Rowling does not resist this generic convention, and her female readers are required to become complicit with judgements and assumptions about femaleness that are in some ways hostile to them.

Rowling's lack of enterprise on gender issues is curious because of the systematic (and very entertaining) ways in which the novels update and blend two different traditions widely separated in their genealogies and histories: the (low) mimetic schoolgirl/boy series with the non-realistic superstructure of high fantasy hero-tale. Her innovativeness lies in the witty postmodern manner in which she augments these genres in ingenious ways with numerous up-to-the-minute allusions to a wide range of mass media discourses (including advertising, journalism, PR 'spin', and bureaucratese). It is impossible not to enjoy the details of broomsticks marketed like high-fashion gym gear, or the media distortions of Rita Skeeter, and the highly efficient owl postal service. In many ways, though, the lineaments of Rowling's fictional backward-looking intertexts — Dickens's London, The Famous Five and similar series, C.S. Lewis's and Tolkien's high-Christian (though inexpert in the case of Tolkien) fantasies, and unisex boarding school series — involve a measure of nostalgia, especially for adult readers and purchasers of the novels (as Zipes 2001 suggests), and the derivative nature of her drawing on these generic intertexts, in which gender stereotypes abound, might go some way to explaining why she deploys the outdated gender scripts she does. Genre, and fiction genres in particular, are not gender-innocent, as gender-conscious mainstream adult literary critics have acknowledged for many decades. But first, it is necessary to assess the evidence which will allow an examination of the question as to whether and in what precise ways Rowling writes not as a woman, but as a man.

In a large structural sense and in small details, gender asymmetry is observable in the novels, though there is a discernible attempt at greater gender symmetry in Phoenix and Prince — female interrogators at Harry's hearing (Phoenix 138–9), more effective female players on the Quidditch field, a larger mixed-gender child team with some very feisty women practitioners (Prince 267), villains who are female, and even a mixed gender statute at the Ministry of Justice (Phoenix 127). The case made by Christine Schoefer is broadly true of the first four novels and less so of the fifth:

Harry's fictional realm of magic and wizardry perfectly mirrors the conventional assumption that men do and should run the world. From the beginning of the first Potter book, it is boys and men, wizards and sorcerors, who catch our attention by dominating the scenes and determining the action ... Girls, when they are not downright silly or unlikable, are helpers, enablers and instruments. No girl is brilliantly heroic the way Harry is, no woman experienced and wise like Professor Dumbledore. In fact the range of female personalities is so limited that neither women nor girls play on the side of evil. (Schoefer, as cited in Zipes, 2001, p. 179)
Although girls may play Quidditch and even lead teams (in the later volumes), they much less often take snitches or get damaged. A simple counting exercise reveals Hogwarts and the wider wainscot world of magic (Le Lievre 2003) to be, in the first four volumes, dominated by male antagonists. The student ratio is 61 boys to 26 girls, and the faculty supports 23 men and 8 women. With rare exceptions, it is boys and men who participate in the adventurous forays, the ritualistic heroic climaxes, and it is they, too, who engage in the mischief which is so much part of the anarchic iconoclasm of the schoolboy adventure genre (McVeigh 2002). The ratio, however, changes in Phoenix (and less strikingly in Prince) but not among the students (there are 13 new names and they are roughly equal). However, in the adult wizard world, there is a dramatic increase in senior personnel: among female faculty at the School and bureaucrats from the ministry of Magic, and even among the villains who increase their female ranks by two (Madame Rosmerta and Alecto) in Prince.

Because of Rowling’s choice to focalise the series through Potter’s consciousness, it is easy to underestimate the centrality of Hermione’s role in the child wizard team. In addition, Rowling’s use of her as plot contrivance, in a genre where plotting is central, sometimes compromises her characterisation. Although Hermione’s research, thinking and emotional intelligence are crucial to the solution of the dilemmas posed in each of the first five volumes of the series, and I will deal with these in more detail below, Hermione, and other girls, are marginalised and/or victimised in most of the exciting ‘action’ sequences, and rendered, like many fairytale heroines, passive and immobile. There are, however, two notable exceptions to this principle – in the fifth and sixth volumes (where Ginny plays a fleeting and minor role in the climactic fracas, p. 558) and it seems possible that at this juncture in her writing career, Rowling begins to respond to her gender-conscious critics, and these most recent novels far more obviously, especially Phoenix, attempt gender balance. However, the impulse appears to have been almost lost sight of in Prince where it is less a driving imperative. Hermione’s centrality to the plotting is reduced in proportion as her interest as the subject of romance is increased. Her plot role to provide the necessary research is inhibited, except in relation to potions, where she functions as a brake on Harry’s reliance on the Half-blood Prince’s annotated textbook. In Prince Harry is educated by the plot device of the Pensieve which does the work of uncovering the history of Voldemort by delivering a variety of minor and major characters’ memories.

In all the novels and less frequently in Prince, Hermione is established as having a library fetish: ‘... that’s what Hermione does’, says Ron shrugging. ‘When in doubt, go to the library’ (Chamber 189) and this interest is critical to the child team’s invariable success, but Rowling does not in the early volumes allow her to be active in the ritual confrontation with Voldemort, which is Harry’s exclusive province. Although Hermione solves the riddle which allows Harry access to the inner chamber and is instrumental in summoning Dumbledore back to Hogwarts, she is excluded from the confrontation with Quirrel on the (weak) grounds that there is not enough potion to serve two entrances. The early novels fit the hero-tale paradigm, in which the hero must face his demons alone, more securely than is true of later volumes. Despite the fact that Hermione is crucial to Harry’s success in Quidditch by setting fire to Snape’s robes, there is no serious question about who receives the adulation. In the second volume, Hermoine’s mistake about cat’s hair removes her from a confrontation with Malfoy and later with Riddle, and subsequently petrifcation removes both Hermione and a potentially useful Ginny from the action in Chamber, thus leaving Harry and Ron to face Aragog and the man-eating spiders, and Harry alone to confront Tom Riddle, though they do have the benefit of her research on Basilisks (Chamber 215).

Although commentators on the novels rightly point to the collaborative nature of problem-solving in the novels and the efficiency and complementarity of the triumvirate (Booth and Booth 2003, McVeigh 2002), it nonetheless remains true that action-sequences in volumes 1–4 are boys-own adventures. This is also true of James Potter’s generation of Hogwartsians, the illegal animagi and their monthly adventures (Azkaban 260–1). The action-climax of Azkaban is different in kind from those in the first two volumes, involving much more talk and exposition, the fields in which Hermione excels. It is significant, though, that Hermione’s role in this climax is heavily gender-marked: her investigative skills and emotional intelligence lead her to identify Lupin as a werewolf (Azkaban 253–4) and also to dispel a potential prejudice against werewolves on the parts of Harry and Ron which is essential to the plot resolution (Azkaban 260); she demonstrates moral courage in attempting to turn the potentially violent confrontation with Snape into a measured and reasoned hearing of the evidence.
(Azkaban 264); and she does keep the exposition on track in ways that are emotionally enabling (Azkaban 272). But her intervention is demeaned when Snape draws attention to her girlish garrulousness (Azkaban 264), and Rowling subsequently has her regret her occasional purposive breaking of school rules - 'We attacked a teacher ... we attacked a teacher ... Oh, we're going to be in so much trouble' (Azkaban 265). At the point where she must produce a patronus spell to ward off Dementors, she cannot, and is, as in previous volumes, incapacitated and marginalised, as is in this case, Potter, at a crucial moment in the narrative:

A thin whip of silver escaped [Harry's] wand and hovered like mist before him. At the same moment Harry felt Hermione collapse next to him. He was alone ... completely alone ...

(Azkaban 281)

Neither child is proof against Dementors and Harry too is paralysed with terror, unable to produce the required positive outlook (figured in the Patronus spell) which is the only antidote, and reliant on outside support (Azkaban 282), a vision later to be identified, in a strange plot conflation of past, present and future, first as his father in the form of his animagus, the stag Prongs (Azkaban 309), and then later as the father he is supposed to have internalised (without ever having known him) (Azkaban 312). Blood rather than experience seems to be the transmission mode. The orphaned Harry's seemingly doomed quest for an adequate father and his trial of a large variety of them (his own, Dumbledore, Sirius, Lupin) is one of the more psychologically intriguing and inventive ways in which the series is evolving. A clue as to the meaning of these patricides is perhaps given in Prince when Harry declares himself to be 'undertaking this dangerous journey alone' (Prince 607) having assured Scrimgeour that 'Dumbledore' will only be gone from the school when none here are loyal to him' (Prince 604) and himself to be 'Dumbledore's man through and through' (Prince 605). To privilege individualistic values over collaborative ones is a conservative move, and the insistent sideling of both Ron and Hermione in Prince seem to bear this out. However, the representation of Voldemort's pathology as hyper-individualism (Prince 259) suggest that the tendency of Potter to move into solo hero mode may be only a temporary aberration.

The notable exceptions to the generalisation that women are marginalised in high drama adventure sequences occur in the final action sequence of Azkaban, and more particularly in the assault on the dark marauders in the Ministry of Magic in Phoenix. Hermione is much more than the 'accessory' that Jack Zipes claims she is (Zipes, 2001) in all five volumes. In volumes 1-5, but not in 6, she is invariably central to plot resolution, and her significance in gender terms is often occluded because she is a second-order hero (with focalisation through, and focus being insistently on, Harry) and also transparently a plot device for Rowling. In Azkaban, she is central to the repeat performance of events because of her experience with the Time-Turner, which has permitted her to study three different subjects at once. This knowledge is put to use in righting the dark events in train in the penultimate resolution. It is a sequence which involves a measure of schizoid behaviour: as Hermione explains, 'we'll see us' (Azkaban 290). There is a danger of seeing and hearing themselves, and more particularly of being seen. In a manoeuvre strongly suggestive of female socialisation, Hermione is far more adept than Harry in imagining the phenomenon of being scrutinised by others. It is also Hermione's scholarship which allows her to explain the freewheeling plot mechanism Rowling uses to re-run time, and the dangers of interfering with time, even for skilled wizards. But again, Hermione is not treated consistently in this scene: she is represented as white-faced, hiding behind a tree, while the intrepid male wizard leads the Hippogriff to safety, with a little help from Hermione (Azkaban 293-5), but she is also, and contradictorily, proactive and decisive in initiating action because of its basis in knowledge learnt from books, knowledge which Harry (and the hapless reader) do not have. Hermione is often one of the most admirable, complex and multi-faceted characters in the series (and not a one-dimensional character, Zipes, 2001), but she is also useful in moving the plot along and explaining the rules and conventions by which the magic world operates. In the case of the action climax in Azkaban, characterisation is sacrificed to Rowling's need for her to be a plot device. In Prince where her plot-device role is reduced, she is critical to the evolving romances, which will be discussed in more detail below.

In the Magic world's school-age Olympics, The Triwizard Tournament, one of the four champions, Fleur Delacour, is a girl. In the first joust with the dragons, she is revealed to face her ordeal with as much nervousness and courage as the male competitors: 'she left the tent with her head held high, and her head clutching her wand' (Goblet 308). The ebullient Bagman's official commentary on her performance is,
however, more consistently negative than for the male competitors, and his adverb reveals a hint of misogyny or prurience, especially if the final comment refers to her burning skirt (see Goblet 314).

‘Oh, I’m not sure that was wise!’ they could hear Bagman shouting gleefully. ‘Oh … nearly! Careful now […] good Lord! I thought she’d had it then!’

(Goblet 308)

In the second ordeal, however, the scales are loaded heavily against her. She is rendered incapable by Grindylows in the second, and by the intervention of Mad-Eye Moody’s impostor early in the third. Her abjection when her score is announced (25 out of 50, far lower than the boys’ scores) marks her as both modest and ashamed, and, through the highly conventionalised comment on her hair, the text objectifies her, reminding readers of her feminality: ‘I deserved zero,’ said Fleur throatily, shaking her magnificent head’ (Goblet 439). Fleur’s ‘silver blonde hair falling almost to her waist’ (Goblet 222, and also 628), Barbie-like, is her major defining physical feature, as is Hermione’s unruly mane, but the difference is that Hermione is more carefully and variously characterised (as having moral courage, leading her male partners into emotional understanding, having a range of social justice agendas, and so on). There is no similar attempt to characterise Fleur, other than to (gender-) mark her as ‘hysterical’ (Goblet 437), a demeaning adjective where a more morally toned one might have been employed, and to mobilise stereotypic Gallic superiority at the expense of British food and aesthetics (Goblet 222, 352, 364). She is certainly not given any distinguishing features as a champion in, for example, the way Viktor Krum is as a sportsman. She undergoes a narrative transmogrification in Prince, however, where she is recuperated, morally at least, at the end of the novel as a lover of integrity, sticking by her man when he is disfigured as a result of being turned into a version of a werewolf:

‘What do you mean, ‘e was going to be married … You theeek, because of these bites, he will not love me … Because ‘e will!’ said Fleur, drawing herself up to her full height and throwing back her long mane of silver hair. ‘It would take more zan a werewolf to stop Bill loving me!…What do I care how ‘e looks? I am good-looking enough for both of us, I theeek! All these scars show is zat my husband is brave!’

(Prince 580–1).

It seems that even at her finest, the reader is not to forget her appearance.

The Triwizard Tournament and Harry Potter’s physical and magical challenges throughout the first six volumes of the series, do, however, allow for a measure of updating of the hero paradigm. This occurs in narrative terms as a result of Rowling’s activation of what Nikolajeva identifies (following Northrop Frye) as the low mimetic narratives of the school story genre (Nikolajeva 2001), but one is reminded of modernist anti-heroes like Joyce’s plebeian anti(?)-hero, Bloom, a mixture of fallibility, self-criticism, self-confidence based on little knowledge, and moral strength, though not of Homeric proportions. The pint-size and very ordinary wizard might triumph often against his adversaries (thanks often to his friends and guardians), but he is far from being the self-loving or self-assured hero. His enemies would wish to construct him as: he suffers from radical self-doubt; he relies heavily on his friendships and networks for support; and he even on occasion rages defensively, trembles and has tantrums when legitimately upset (Phoenix 824). He might seem a ‘prat’ to Ron for ‘acting the hero’ (Goblet 436–7) not making ‘winning’ a higher priority, but Bagman, speaking for the Judging Committee and in the light of full knowledge derived from Mermen, makes clear that ‘moral fibre’ (Goblet 440) and collegiality are higher goods than selfish individualism.

Harry is not a vengeful hero, though he has reason to be, but rather one whose aim is merely survival in a murderous world (Le Lievre 2001). He survives because of the strength and multi-talented nature of the teams he is able to build around him. Because the novels valorise collegiality and implicitly interrogate the notion of individual heroism, thereby rewriting the individualistic male hero paradigm, and because the novels are insistently focalised through Harry, Christine Schoefer’s quest for the ‘brilliantly heroic’ girl (Zipes 2002) is rather beside the point. However, there is justice in her claim that there are serious gender imbalances in books 1–4, and I would add, volume six. It may be that investigating the fore-tales of the series and the need to elaborate the plot details (mainly through Dumbledore’s memories) have led Rowling in Prince to valorise a more individualistic ethos. Whether Ron and Hermione are permanently sidelined, in favour of romantic outcomes for all three (or four, if Ginny is allowed into the inner collaborative circle, as has been increasingly the case in Prince), or whether Harry’s announcement of his quest as a lone one is a mistaken direction remain to be seen.

Is the discernibly positive shift in gender balance
in *Phoenix* perhaps a response to such feminist critics as Zipes and Schoefer? In the fifth (and to some extent the sixth) volume, more major roles are taken by women in all three groups of protagonists: the teacherly cohort, the Death Eaters, and among the schoolchildren. The mixed gender DA (Dumbledore’s Army) is instituted as a result of Hermione’s (gender marked) sensitive response to Harry’s uncertainty about his proficiency in the practical aspects of Defence Against the Dark Arts (*Phoenix* 328), which the High Inquisitor had debased by making it an entirely theoretical study. Again, Hermione is central to the action. It is her emotional intelligence, rationally based caution (guided by Sirius when she makes mistakes, *Phoenix* 370–3), and organisational skills which assemble and maintain the organisation of 28 students committed to secrecy, a taxing feat. She ensures Harry’s authority by democratic means (*Phoenix* 391), and is highly proactive in schooling/moderating Harry’s adolescent rages and tendencies to impulsiveness (*Phoenix* 355, 573) which could potentially make the hero impotent or lead him into risky situations. Her intention is to ensure that not only he, but also his trusted phalanx of DA, are as well prepared as they can be for doing magical combat with the Death Eaters. However, more often than not, it is wit and language, tactics which Harry learns from Hermione, which function as the most effective tools in their combat.

Although the climactic action sequence in the Ministry is staged rather like the climax of a western, with thestrals functioning as horses and wands doing the service of guns (though less lethally as a result of magical interventions), it is intriguing to notice that Harry has access to a new weapon. It is his tongue which is informed by wit and which is used to buy time in order to preserve the lives of his army of juveniles. Each of these novels employs sequences in their final chapters in which exposition of the meaning of the narrative occurs, and *Phoenix* is no exception. However, in this novel, much exposition occurs before the meeting with Dumbledore and Harry manages it himself in his exchanges with his adversaries. These exchanges deliver telling blows to the Dark team, and they are delivered with panache and confidence by Harry, for example, the revelation of the Voldemort’s Muggle parentage (*Phoenix* 784). Talk was a tactic which Hermione, ‘Little Miss Question-All’ (*Phoenix* 747), had successfully modelled in the confrontation earlier in this novel with Umbridge when she deflected her from using the illegal and lethal Crucius Curse on Harry and escorted her into the Forbidden Forest. Talk even strategically covers-up the prophecy Voldemort and his followers are desperate to recover. It is a new form of engagement for Harry, and it is one learnt from his female compatriot. Although outnumbered, the teamwork of the DA ensures their survival and courage is distributed across the mixed-gender team: even the normally underpowered Neville has his moment of glory, and each of the girls (Hermione, Luna and Ginny), by their courage, contributes to the knowledge quotient required for success.

If women, at least in volumes 1-4 of the series, are marginalised as agents in the action climaxes, Hermione’s role as intellectual leader of the child-wizard team is uncontented. As demonstrated above, her intelligence, commitment to research and to speaking her mind do frequently and consistently empower her, and the Potter team as a whole. One could argue, as one of the Japanese undergraduate readers does, that she is underdeveloped as a character, simply a plot contrivance, explaining as she does the world of magic to the magic-illiterate Harry, and of course, to the reader. But this would be to under-sell the rich detailing of this character. It is not merely plot necessity, for example, that inspires Hermione’s defence of Winky in the face of the most powerful Ministry officials (*Goblet* 121), but rather her characterisation as a consistent pursuer of social justice agendas (*Prince* 341), which the boys are often indifferent to, or scornful of, or as in the case of the *Daily Prophet* expose, lacking the political ‘savvy’ to take the kind of action Hermione fearlessly does (*Phoenix* 567). She has a will to penetrate stereotypes, including beetle animagi, and tell the truth. She is a critical reader of the *Daily Prophet* because she intends to know the mind of the enemy (*Phoenix* 225). In addition, Hermione is reluctant to accept the magic world’s ‘hysteria’, ‘bigotry’ and ‘prejudice’ not only about elves, but also about giants and werewolves (*Phoenix* 377). In this willingness to rethink conventional givens of fairylore and mythic stereotypes, she resembles Dumbledore, the locus of moral power in the novels (and their ultimate plot contrivance?). Such destabilising of stereotypes is, of course, welcome to Rowling’s postmodern reading community, but Rowling does not attempt to similarly destabilise gender stereotypes very often in the Potter universe.

It is not only the underage female wizard who exercises power in *Phoenix*, but also the adult witches. The face of evil is male in volumes 1–4 and is characterised in the manner made very familiar in formulaic
fiction, by external representation of physiognomy. Male adversaries are afforded a range of inventive and not gender-marked characteristics: Quirrel’s turban hides his more sinister alter ego takeover persona; Riddle is remarkably like Potter except for the magic scar; the Death-Eaters are faceless in hoods reminiscent of the Klu Klux Klan. Voldemort is conceived within the high fantasy frame, and is frankly mythic with his strong resemblance to a pale snake, though his early years are treated more naturally in Prince. The face of female evil is, however, different and altogether more conventionally gender-inflected. Dolores Umbridge is a figure of comedy: an out-of-control terrorist in a pink cardigan and pink Alice band (Phoenix 203), with a saccharine kindergarten teacher voice, which does not nonetheless succeed in masking her sinister side. Her introduction to the narrative is via unsuitable description which leaves little to the imagination about her moral nature:

He thought she looked just like a large, pale toad. She was rather squat with a broad, flabby face, as little neck as Uncle Vernon, and a very wide, slack mouth. Her eyes were large, round, and slightly bulging. Even the little black velvet bow perched on top of her short curly hair put him in mind of a large fly she was about to catch on a long sticky tongue. [...] The witch spoke in a flattery, girlish, high-pitched voice that took Harry aback; he had been expecting a croak (Phoenix 146–7).

Misperceiving herself to be on the side of the angels, Umbridge presents herself in false pupil-friendly, bureaucratic jargon, mind-numbing and parodic of Education ministry rhetoric (Phoenix 212–4). She patronises students but is easily out-maneouvred by them especially in the area of educational philosophy (Phoenix 241–4). She is motivated solely by her bureaucratic ambitions. Despite her unctuous kindergarten spiel punctuated with insincere ‘dears’, and resorted to at moments when she is most under threat (Phoenix 244–6), she is capable of inflicting permanent bodily harm in detention, and worse, acting alone and without authorisation in initiating Dementor attacks in Muggle-land, and, more chillingly, even uttering the forbidden and last-resort Cruciatus curse. As a villain operative mainly within the low mimetic frame, she has some limited interest, and is strikingly different in characterisation from her adversary, Professor McGonagall, whose hawk-like (Phoenix 213), stern features and facial impassivity belie her deep concern for children, sense of fun, forgiving nature, and her rational flexibility around rule-breaking. It is curious that Rowling is prepared to allow her young readers to fathom this character on the basis of her behaviour rather than appearance, and that this heroine is so under-characterised. Again, one must conclude that plot exigencies, and the need for Dumbledore to have a reliable agent at the chalk-face, is a significant factor in her thin characterisation.

The fine detail of how Rowling deals with gender scripts provides further and more pointed evidence of her mobilisation of outmoded gender stereotypes. In Diagon Alley, Harry observes

funny little witches from the country, up for a day’s shopping; venerable-looking wizards arguing over the latest article in Transfiguration Today; wild-looking warlocks, raucous dwarfs and, once, what looked suspiciously like a hag, who ordered a plate of raw liver from behind a thick woollen balacava. (Azkaban 42)

Females are patronised; men of the corresponding class dignified. There is even systematic discrimination on the wilder side: ‘wildness’, youthful high spirits, raucousness, even rule-breaking are valorised in the Hogwarts universe as they are in many schoolboy/girl novels especially if such deviant acts are motivated by spontaneity and generosity, and lead to self-knowledge (McVeigh 2002), but the hag occupies a different narrative territory. Several decades of revisionist history (Brauner 1995, Hill 1995) and self-conscious feminist linguistics (Daly 1979) attempting to recuperate the word ‘witch’ does not seem to have touched Rowling, if Hagrid’s brushing off of the witch in the seedier end of Knockturn Alley (Chamber 45) is any indication:

An aged witch stood in front of him, holding a tray of what looked horribly like whole human fingernails. She leered at him, showing mossy teeth. Harry backed away.

‘I’m fine, thanks,’ he said. ‘I’m just –’

‘HARRY! What d’you think yer doin’ down there?’

Harry’s heart leapt. So did the witch; a load of fingernails cascaded down over her feet and she cursed as the massive form of Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, came striding towards them, beetle-black eyes flashing over his great bristling beard. (Chamber 45)

One who knows and feels keenly about prejudice, as Hagrid the half-giant is supposed to, might be expected to treat the aged witch with more respect, but Rowling’s mode at this point in the narrative is regressive Dickensian gothic. In context, this passage serves to locate Malfoy’s shady dealings in illegal and dark magical artefacts in Borgin and Burkes’s shop (Chamber 42–5). Mr Ollivander’s wands also seem to be differentiated along gender lines: women’s for charms and men’s for the
more prestigious class of magic, transfiguration (Stone 63).

Even women-identified clothing is comedic material. It may be that the rush to avoid pink and fluffy earmuffs in herbology (Chamber 72) is intended as a self-conscious, mildly satiric game with gender conventions. However, Ron's aversion to being thought of as effeminate seems to run in deeper, and very conventional, channels: he is appalled by the prospect of wearing dress robes that resemble women's clothing (Goblet 139–40), is mocked for their effeminacy by Malfoy (Goblet 149–50), and finds it needful to use a 'severing charm' on the frills on his dress robes for the Yule Ball (Goblet 358). He is also represented as being hypermasculine in his fondness for the anatomical curves and alcoholic beverages dispensed by Madame Rosmerta (Prince 232–3).

Women do housework at Grimmauld Place, and men avoid it (apart from Mr Weasley, who supervises the cooking that his wife actually does) (Phoenix 81–5). The gender scripts followed even by the house-elves Dobby and Winky are not dissimilar: Dobby enjoys his independence and working for pay whereas his female counterpart weeps, yearns to be dependent, to be enslaved, and needs to be needed. Winky is continually abject and expects mindless loyalty of herself to her master (Phoenix 330–3). Tonks and Merula are similarly romantic abjects when their beloveds, Lupin and Riddle respectively, ignore them (Prince 151, 245–6). The ultimate in female abjection is Moaning Myrtle who is paranoid, hysterical, melodramatic, suicidal (Chamber 162). The opposite of tragic, she is the eternal victim, but never enjoys the pity she should merit, comically associated with the toilet-bowl beside which she died at the hands of the Basilisk (Chamber 171–2).

Women, and Hermione in particular, are frequently represented as wearing their emotion very publicly (as for example Ginny's valentine, Chamber 178) and as emotionally unstable. They are vulnerable to emotional take-over by such as Lockhart (both Mrs Weasley and Hermione uncharacteristically fall prey to him in Chamber 28), and Ginny 'tells all' to Tom Riddle (Chamber 228). They are also easily made hostage to Fred and George's love potions and likely to conspire in large groups to achieve their romantic objectives (Prince 286). For all her assurance, proactive heroism, and nerdish hard work, Hermione 'turn[s] pink' when praised for her knowledge (Goblet 205), and she frequently cries empathetically (Azkaban 160, 215), or in one case out of a sense of aloneness (Stone 127).

Girls engage in collective hysteria: they twitter, 'giggle and whisper', 'shriek with laughter' (Goblet 338), are 'silly', 'clutch' one another and hebble mindlessly (Prince 211), and when 'terrified' have fits of 'hysterics' (Goblet 208). The unproblematised and essentialising assumption that Rowling appears to make is the one she attributes to Harry, namely that 'girls' brains work' differently (Phoenix 462). A comical gender-coded moment in the climax to Phoenix occurs when Hermione prevents Harry from harming the Death Eater who has transformed into a baby (Phoenix 791), a concession one could never imagine the stereotypic young male heroes would make.

Male and female behaviour in preparation for the Yule tide Ball is heavily gender-inflected in predictable ways. Girls take vastly more time and care with their dressing than boys (Goblet 357); boys are totally inept socially, to the extent that Ron voices his anxiety that if he and Harry cannot take action to invite a partner, they will be saddled with a 'pair of trolls' (344). To her credit, Rowling has Hermione provide the word-perfect put-down to such sexist concern with appearance to the detriment of personality (Goblet 344). There are a few exceptions to this predictable gender scripting which model less outdated gender behaviour: Angelina, the sporty Quidditch player, accepts Fred's invitation to the ball in as casual and cool a manner as it is prosfered (Goblet 343); Cho is at least considereate of Harry's feelings when she must refuse his invitation (Goblet 346). The boys' discomfiture with their gender scripts as young adolescents negotiating a new terrain is rather more moving, if often comedic (as in the case of Ron's lability in love, Prince 367), than her treatment of the girls managing their new roles. A measure of irony in the focalisation makes Harry's tortuous attempts to turn Cho into a romantic partner into the stuff of teenage comedy: observing Roger Davies and his girlfriend 'glued together by the lips', Harry seeks modestly just to achieve contact with Cho's hand:

Cho's hand was lying on the table beside her coffee, and Harry was feeling a mounting pressure to take hold of it. *Just do it, he told himself,* as a fount of mingled panic and excitement surged up inside his chest. *Just reach out and grab it* [...] Amazing how much more difficult it was to extend his arm twelve inches and touch her hand than to snatch a speeding Snitch from midair ... (Phoenix 560)

It is the emotionally mature Hermione who, in relation to these events, and earlier in relation to selecting partners for the Yule Ball, uncovers the mysteries of
female psychology and who tries to educate the inept lover about Cho’s grief. Ron’s backhanded compliment on Hermione’s emotional intelligence: ‘You should write a book … translating mad things girls do so boys can understand them’ (Phoenix 573) has a sting in its tail for the girl reader, implying as it does that she become complicit with a view of men and women which is sharply binarised and unequal.

While there may be some verisimilitude in the grainy way in which Rowling represents the psychology of young men on the edge of sexual maturity, there are some telling silences in this narrative of young adulthood. The differently coded behaviour of the boys and girls may be hormone-driven, but there is little sense of the adolescent protagonists inhabiting real bodies. Ron’s and Harry’s exposure to the sexual allure of non-human Veelas with their erotic dancing at the Quidditch World Cup, to their ‘moon-bright’ faces and ‘white-gold hair’ induces trancelike, self-destructive behaviour in the boys (to which Hermione is immune) (Goblet 93–4). That the young men’s response constitutes a hormone rush is obscured by the language in which sexual impulses are associated with being unhinged and with the demonstration of virility:

And as the Veela danced faster and faster, wild, half-formed thoughts started chasing through Harry’s dazed mind. He wanted to do something very impressive, right now. Jumping from the box into the stadium seemed a good idea … but would it be good enough? … Next to him, Ron was frozen in an attitude that looked as though he was about to dive from a springboard. (Goblet 94)

Ron’s subsequent encounter with the Veela in Fleur Delacour similarly discomposes him (‘I don’t know what made me do it! […] What was I playing at?’ Goblet 347). It reveals sexual attraction to be somewhat maniacal. Harry’s explanation (Goblet 348) further entrenches the regressive notion that women are sirens, a danger to hapless men who cannot control themselves once exposed to the poisonous charms, often symbolised by hair which can render Ron speechless (Goblet 222). When thwarted, the Veelas are truly monstrous:

Watching through his Omnisculars, Harry saw that they didn’t look remotely beautiful now. On the contrary, their faces were elongating into sharp, cruel-beaked bird heads, and long, scaly wings were bursting from their shoulders. (Goblet 101)

The context may be Quidditch and the parody of cheerleaders comic hyperbole, but the representation of women’s use of beauty to allure and seduce and their inherent hostility is utterly traditional (harking back to Sirens, Medusa, Morgan le Fay), and regressive. Feminist reclamation of myth have no place in Rowling’s consciousness. What is more disturbing about her representation of witches in history is her casual sanitisation of centuries of witch-roasting, purporting to be Hilda Bagshot’s History of Magic:

Non-magic people (more commonly known as Muggles) were particularly afraid of magic in medieval times, but not very good at recognising it. On the rare occasion that they did catch a real witch or wizard, burning had no effect whatsoever. The witch or wizard would perform a basic Flame-Freezing Charm and then pretend to shriek with pain while enjoying a gentle tickling sensation. Indeed, Wendelin the Weird enjoyed being burnt so much that she allowed herself to be caught no fewer than forty-seven times in various disguises. (Azkaban 7)

As an educated woman, and there is no doubt about the extent of her scholarship, is Rowling unaware of decades-old scholarship which estimates this slow genocide to have exterminated an estimated nine million women over several centuries, extending well beyond the medieval period? It is, in my view as a reader fond of the comedy and updating of mythology/fairy tale in these novels, not a subject for whimsy or denial, even in books targeted at younger readers, and not even in fantasy.

By contrast with Veelas, human bodies are reduced to what is safe (and conventional) to mention: hair, hands, lips, teeth, acne (once – Phoenix 344), and a prominent scar. Harry’s first kiss is almost presexual, inspired by a Quidditch victory and its impact is described in desexualising language (it feels like ‘several sunlit days’, Prince 499). The anxiety to be alleviated, rather than the new embodied experience to be enjoyed, is fear of the loss of his homosocial relationship with Ron through his relationship with Ginny. All other sexualised features (breasts, periods, penises, wetdreams, involuntary erections, breaking voices etc.) are under erasure. Very occasional flirtations with bawdiness are the exception to the rule (for example, Moaning Myrtle’s sly spying on prefects in their baths (Goblet 401–2), or adolescent jokes about Uranus (Phoenix 718). Hormones may partly explain behaviour, especially rages and tears, but they do not manifest themselves in other embodied ways. Is this attributable to the author’s protectiveness of a readership younger than her protagonists? Or is it regression to that more
innocent era to which her fiction harks back? Is it in any sense conditioned by the attempted censorship of right-wing Christians whom she is seeking not to alienate further? Another sexuality-related silence is to do with non-standard forms of sexual identity, especially homosexuality. Lockhart is the only character to date who could be thought of as exemplifying any stereotypic markers of gayness and it is significant that these are hints only, and that he is mocked for his effeminacy and cross-gender behaviours. He is a parody of high camp with his narcissism, his haircurling and hairnet (Chamber 108), his adoring female fans (his only male admirer is the testosterone-challenged Colin Creevey, Chamber 83), and his absurd aestheticism:

My dear boy,' said Lockhart... 'Do use your common sense. My books wouldn't have sold half as well if people didn't think I'd done all those things. No one wants to read about some ugly old Armenian warlock, even if he did save a village from werewolves. He'd look dreadful on the front cover. No dress sense at all. And the witch who banished the Bandon Banshee had a hairy chin. I mean, come on...’ (Chamber 220)

Gender scripts in relation to parenting, and especially mothering are highly conventional in this series. The ultimate motherly act is to die for one’s child, as Harry’s mother does. As a class, mothers and fathers, though, can be dangerously partial, as are the caricatured anti-types, Mr and Mrs Dursley towards their son, Dudley, whose every wish is met (for example, for more than 37 presents), to the great disadvantage of their nephew who is imprisoned, underfed and maltreated, and given pathetic presents (a single tissue, second-hand socks), their form of protest at being forcibly connected to the magic world. The Privet Drive household is a patriarchy in which power is brutally and automatically exercised by Uncle ‘don’t-ask-questions’ Vernon (Philosopher 20), and shrilly implemented by Aunt Petunia. Their goods are consumerist ones, and Dudley is incapable of valuing anything. By contrast, the family style of their magical counterpart family is romantically poverty-stricken, rich in food (especially sausages and bacon sandwiches) (Chamber 38-9, 40), and cuddles. Mrs Weasley, a ‘sabre-toothed tiger’ in a floral apron (Chamber 30-1) is a suburban earth mother with a fine line in motherly magic, and like Hermione, rich in emotional intelligence (Stone 173). She invariably understands Harry’s emotional needs and is happy to be the surrogate Mother that Mrs Dursley is too fearful to become. But also like Hermione, the normally sharp-witted suburban witch is undiscriminating in her taste for self-promoting media stars (Chamber 32, 38). This momentary aberration in judgement is uncharacteristic in each case and makes them the butt of male jocularity.

In talking informally to the first level Japanese university students who read Harry Potter, several interesting phenomena emerged, which suggest that the novels are consumed, quite self-consciously, for their regressive gender scripts. To my surprise, the students themselves identified their reading of the Harry Potter books as a sign of their imbrication in a national pathology their Ethics classes at Senior High School had taught them to label as the ‘Cinderella’ or ‘Peter Pan syndromes.’ They are critical of themselves for this, but unrepentant, and celebrate it as a sign of Japanese isolation, of living in a relatively safe place, in a culture committed, after the horrors of World War II, to pacifism and to personal security. All of them volunteered the view that although they consider themselves adult, they read these works as if they were children, and that this was nothing to be ashamed of. All of these women were unconscious of their identification with male characters exclusively, both of the child variety and of the teacherly variety, and with characters other than Harry. One, in defiance of the novel’s moral perspective, and self-consciously counter-culturally, found Draco Malfoy irresistible, enjoying his spitefulness and nastiness; given the choice she claimed she would prefer to be a Slytherin, and she dreads the day Malfoy takes up with a girlfriend (‘I will be jealous and feel crushed’). It is hard to see this form of identification as other than indulging the desires (to be other than a good compliant girl) that her culture denies her. She also expressed great admiration for the freewheeling anarchy of the Weasley twins. Quizzed about their lack of interest in the women characters, another rightly pointed to the paucity of women in volumes 1–3, and expressed her deep hostility to Hermione on the grounds that she had delusions of adulthood when in fact she was a child, that she was not ‘kawaii’ (cute), that she meddles, has too much self-confidence, promotes herself as ‘number 1’, and is far too precocious – all judgements that echo (and endorse and enact) the construction of women in her own culture as modest and compliant. Indeed, it may well be this aspect of the text which makes the text more familiar and more assimilable to her Japanese sensibility. Another, whose main identification was with Lupin and Sirius as Harry’s father-figures (‘I want to be Harry because his godfather is Sirius’), had objections to the Hermione of Phoenix because she tried to
prevent Harry meeting Sirius and was critical of his behaviour on the platform at Victoria Station. This was a young woman who has registered on several occasions her grief at the death of Sirius, and her expectation that he will, in future volumes, be magically restored to Harry. All informants had strong responses, not so much to particular teachers, as to those teacherly styles which respected children, and provided practical educational experiences (especially Lupin and McGonagall), and were critical of those who were negative towards students, boring or irrelevant. If I had stayed longer in Japan, a club based around Potter, in a culture that takes such extra-curricula clubs more than seriously, would have been irresistible. Gender-conscious scripts may not be a popular agenda-item, though clearly a program of resistant reading might be empowering and perhaps begin the process of debriefing them of the Harry Potter world’s unconstructed gender stereotypes (Fetterley 1977, Felman 1993). Such a program might focus on the largely occluded power exercised by such as Hermione, Ginny Weasley, McGonagall and Olympe, but move into the contested territory of systematic gender stereotyping and its limitations, and in Japan, its covert benefits for women.

A complex series like Harry Potter, as the Japanese readers make clear, fulfils many different ontological scripts and has the potential to generate a myriad of subject-positions fulfilling a range of readerly desires. It would be as absurd as the ill-informed rightwing Christian backlash against its alleged New Ageism and pro-Dark Arts orientation to call for a ban on it on gender grounds, but I trust that the foregoing puts flesh on the bones of Trites’s comment that it is ‘altogether more sexist than it needs to be’ (Trites 2001, p. 472). However, as a teacher, the question of Rowling’s construction both as a reader and a writer by powerful cultural forces in relation to gender which she has failed to problematise, is unavoidable. As one who teaches literature from a basis in theory which includes gender theory, I would as a normal part of my pedagogy alert students, male and female, to the systematic biases and asymmetries in the Rowling universe, and to the dubious pleasures of comfortable and reassuring gender stereotypes. It would be irresistible to encourage readers to identify the mismatch between clever updating of the world of wizardry and the failure to supply congruent updated gender scripts. If the Harry Potter series and my Japanese students’ reading of it are mass media events which could serve as straws in the wind to indicate how much gender theory is beginning to bite, then the era of post-patriarchy has not arrived and feminists’ longed-for retirement as post-feminists is not in sight.

Notes

1. Apart from Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix (2003) which was consulted in its American edition, all references are to the British edition. The texts are referred to throughout this paper using the cue titles Stone (Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone), Chamber (Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets), Azkaban (Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban), Goblet (Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire), Phoenix (Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix) and Prince (Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince).

2. My thanks are due to the four outstanding first-level students at Kobe College (Mai, Yukie, Hiroe and Masako – surnames with-held at students’ request) who were willing to write and talk frankly about being young Japanese women who are also readers of the Rowling’s novels. They have read and commented on a draft of this paper.

References


