Hermione syndrome: Reexamining feminist sidekicks and power in 2000-2010 children's and young adult fantasy literature

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Hermione Syndrome:

Reexamining Feminist Sidekicks and Power in 2000-2010 Children's and Young Adult

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by

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Dedication

For those of us who read to escape—may we now return empowered.

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Abstract

The 2000-2010 decade saw a proliferation of English language fantasy texts for young

readers. In the wake of *Harry Potter's* success, many other fantasy series followed patterns

laid down in Rowling's text, including writing female characters as Hermione-shaped girls

and women. While there are positive aspects to these types of characters, which have been

lauded thoroughly in popular culture and the academy, there are also significant drawbacks

that have received far less attention. This thesis investigates these Hermione-shaped

characters, and the texts from which they come, culturally, narratologically, and

epistemologically. The culmination of this research finds that, even against authorial intent,

the genre of children's and young adult fantasy, with its structural narrative patterns as well

as ingrained ideological pressures, often creates characters that appear feminist but who often

uphold patriarchal power structures.

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Introduction

A simple Google search of "Hermione Granger Feminist" will return more than a half-million results from commercial websites, fan blogs, and academic works, most of which praise the iconic *Harry Potter* character for her daring and outspoken feminism in the books and movies. On page one of this search you might see titles such as "10 Reasons Why Hermione Granger was the Ultimate Literary Feminist Hero" (Malbon), "Why Hermione Granger Is a Feminist Icon" (Iyer), or "The Glory that is Hermione Granger" (Busch). Further, entire books and essay collections have been dedicated to this character and how she navigates her world and comes out the other side as a strong woman and an ideal role-model for young readers. One such collection, *Hermione Granger Saves the World: Essays on the Feminist Heroine of Hogwarts,* edited by Christopher E. Bells, praises the character and challenges other writers to create such an admirable character for new readers. Countless articles also laud Hermione as a pinnacle of feminist achievement, such as "Feminist Characters in Harry Potter," where A. S. Mohanagiri writes, "Hermione develop[s] from a hesitant young lady into an autonomous young lady," and "when two of her male companions are remaining adjacent to her, Hermione does not rely upon them to battle for her" (Mohanagiri 293). Piece after piece praises this character for what she has meant to readers and what she has done for the genre of children's and young adult (YA) fantasy literature.

Yet, is Hermione deserving of the label "feminist icon" she has been popularly awarded? There is considerable scholarship which would say, no, she does not fulfill that role well, such as Ashley Jones' thesis *Is Harry Potter a Feminist Children's Series?: An Examination of the Complicated Gender Dynamics of J.K. Rowling's Hermione Granger*.

Jones concludes that the lack of sisterhood within the texts, and Hermione's cruelty towards girls she deems too feminine does not allow her to be the feminist icon many claim her to be (Jones 107). While, according to my research, Jones is in the minority, her argument is supported by established scholars such as Tison Pugh, Roberta Seelinger Trites, and Elizabeth Heilman, whose theoretical work allows Jones to make her claims. My thesis will not directly engage with whether Hermione is or is not a feminist character; that conversation is already packed with enough voices. Instead, I hope to look at what I will be calling "Hermione Syndrome," a trend I have observed in other YA and children's fantasy texts published directly in the wake of *Harry Potter*. Works of children's and YA fantasy literature written in the years 2000-2010 feature a number of strong female characters, but as I argue in this thesis, they often fall into the same negative patterns of Hermione. Like her, these characters fill the role of side-kick instead of hero, must give up their power in order to support their story's hero, and are likely to act as a love interest or prize for the hero to win after he saves his world. They are diminished in order to support the hero and exalt his position within the structure of their shared narrative.

The early 2000s saw a massive increase in publishing of English language fantasy texts for young readers from the US, England, and Australia. Many of these series, like *Harry Potter,* focused on the popular "chosen one" narrative where one boy, for it is almost always a boy, is chosen by fate or chance to save his world. He then usually gets or retains a pair of friends who help him navigate his new place of power and who support him as he saves the world. Harry, Ron, and Hermione fit this trope, as do other iconic trios such as Luke, Han, and Leah of *Star Wars,* and Cory, Shawn, and Topanga of *Boy Meets World.* Both *Star Wars* and *Boy Meets World* predate *Harry Potter*, and we can see Rowling

following this pattern of having a powerful woman act as support and love interest to other members of this friendship triangle. While countless scholarship has been dedicated to investigating Hermione's position within this triangle, it is other, similarly placed girls and women in subsequent children's and YA fantasy texts I investigate in this thesis.

In the post-Potter boom, this heroic trio often consisted of the chosen one boy, his male best friend, and a girl who is incredibly adept at navigating the world they are fighting for. This girl is often smarter, braver, and better suited to take on the challenges facing their world than the text's protagonist. However, since she is not the "chosen one," she must take a supporting role to the boy. Hermione Syndrome, then, refers to the reoccurring ways this girl, and other supporting girls and women, are treated by their authors and readers—cheated of the power that could be theirs and forced to use their energy and efficacy to support their male protagonist.

As someone who grew up reading 2000's fantasy novels, but having not been allowed to read the *Harry Potter* series due to religious censoring, I did not know what cultural forces might have been driving the patterns I was seeing. Now, as a scholar of children's and YA literature, I can see the connections between Hermione and the other female characters that came after her. To investigate these patterns, I created a set of parameters that allowed me to narrow down the boom of fantasy texts from this period. For this thesis, I chose to eliminate texts other than words-in-a-row books, which means I will not be delving into comics or fantasy movies. The series I investigate are firmly planted in the fantasy genre and do not stray into science fiction or dystopian fiction for two reasons. First, in the 2000-2010 decade, neither science fiction nor dystopian fiction were the most popular genre of YA speculative fiction. Second, I would argue that future-oriented or dystopian literature might do better job

at combating Hermione Syndrome with female protagonists such as *The Hunger Game's* Katniss Everdeen or *Scythe's* Citra Terranova. While all varieties of speculative fiction share certain characterizations and tropes, I wanted to limit my exploration to similar texts that all adhere to the form and rules of fantasy literature as a distinct genre.

Fantasy has largely gone unexamined by academia when compared to other literary genres and, with the exception of *Harry Potter* and Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series, there is scarcely any serious academic writing on contemporary fantasy series for children, regardless of how popular they become. One might argue that a considerable amount of scholarship has been devoted to earlier fantasy texts such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings (LOTR)* series and C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* books and to Golden Age fantasy texts such as *Alice in Wonderland* or *The Wizard of Oz.* One could further argue that significant research has been done on the placement of women in these texts, and to this point, I acquiesce. However, there is a dearth of scholarship on contemporary children's and YA fantasy literature, and I hope to remedy this lack of critical attention. I also hope to be able to add something of value to the conversation surrounding female characters and how they operate in the fantasy worlds created for them and in the minds of their authors and readers.

Primary Texts

A mainstay of the 2000's children's and YA fantasy genre was the series novel. Most of the popular fantasy texts of this era came in installments of at least three books, though many series went well past that to include five to seven books. When selecting texts for this thesis, I wanted series books that were published during or directly after the *Harry Potter* craze but were not attempting to do the same thing as Rowling with the boarding-school

novel. I also wanted authors who came from different countries, but were all writing for the global, English-reading audience, and that all became popular, at least for a time, for that global audience. Finally, all of the texts needed to be a "chosen one" narrative in which the protagonist is a boy while at least one of his sidekicks is a girl. Therefore, the texts I examine in this thesis are Christopher Paolini's *The Inheritance Cycle* (2002-2011), Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005-2009), Chris D'Lacey's *The Last Dragon Chronicles* (2001-2012), and Garth Nix's *The Keys to the Kingdom* (2003-2010).

Each of these series gained enough popularity to have publishing runs not only in their home country but also abroad and often in translation. Paolini and Riordan, both American authors, have had their series published all over the world and were both successful in the US when published, landing on *The New York Times'* Best Sellers List. D'Lacey, a British author, had his work published first in the UK and, when the first book of *The Last Dragon Chronicles* became a best seller, an American version was created that moved the location from England to New England. Nix, already a popular fantasy author of books like the *Old Kingdom* series, had *The Keys to the Kingdom* series published in both his home country of Australia and abroad. Some of these series have retained their popularity, while others were already off the best-sellers list by the time they wrapped publication. However, they all benefitted from the post-Potter publishing boom that allowed for more fantasy texts than ever before to enter the market, and also allowed for greater readership among first-time fantasy readers.

Paolini wrote *The Inheritance Cycle's* first book *Eragon* at fifteen years old and was first published by his family's business before being picked up by Knopf a year later in 2003. *Inheritance* follows the journey of a boy named Eragon, who bonds with the last free dragon

and must help lead a rebellion against a tyrant. Even as Eragon is the protagonist of this series, several women are main players and shapers of the plot. They mostly work in ways that move Eragon toward his goal of destroying the evil king, even when it hurts them or their people. A few women do stand up against Eragon, such as Elva, the girl he accidently curses to take on all the pain of those around her, and Islanzadí, the queen of the elves, who is more concerned with her people than the fate of humans. However, all "good women" in this text eventually work with him and on his terms, regardless of the pain he has inflicted upon them.

Eragon always needs to use women's labor to better himself, and it is the power of the last female dragon that awards him his place as hero within the text. Further, Eragon wields ultimate power within these texts, bestowed by his narrative role of hero. It seems that the strong female characters' magical, physical, and social power should be able to control him easily, yet it never does. Even as women take over the governance of several nations after the final battle is won and the world needs to be rebuilt, Eragon chooses exile rather than risk losing some of his power to these women. In this series, women have power but use it only when they are serving Eragon and his purposes.

While *The Inheritance Cycle* is the story of a farm boy in a far off fantasyland who rises to greatness, the next series I investigate centers around the son of a god who was born into greatness. Riordan's 2005 *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* centers on the titular Percy, demigod son of Poseidon, who must rally the disgruntled bastard children of the gods and save all of Western civilization from the Titan Chronos. This series fills out the friendship triangle formula perfectly with Percy as the hero, his satyr best friend Grover as comedic relief, and Percy's eventual girlfriend Annabeth—daughter of Athena—filling the last spot.

There seems to be only room for one girl in this series, as every time a new, powerful girl enters the main story, she either dies or is whisked away to another, off-page plot. The daughters of Zeus and Hades, who both threaten Percy's right to be the "chosen one," endure fates that remove them from the main plotline. Other minor characters from the series, such as the daughters of Ares or Aphrodite, fill out stereotypes of violent "butch" women or useless, overly feminine ones.

Even the goddesses and monsters of this series do not get to avoid the perils of sexism as they keep most of the pettiness and vitriol of the original Greek Myths, even as some of the male gods get to become more mellow "cool dads." To be fair, no deity is labeled morally faultless throughout the series. However, it is the goddesses who are shown to have less power, to be more prone to irrational or emotional decision-making, and to be more concerned with their appearances than the fate of the world. At the end of the series it is the goddess of staying at home in the kitchen, Hestia, who saves the day by encouraging the hero to follow her example and give up some of his power. Ultimately, girls and women in this series are judged and valued by their ability and willingness (or unwillingness) to mother others.

In D'Lacey's 2001 *The Fire Within*, the first of the seven book *The Last Dragon Chronicles*, David Rain comes to live as a tenant in a house full of magical clay dragons with landlady/potter Liz Pennykettle and her daughter Lucy. While in the first book David must learn to believe in magic, by the last he must fight interdimensional thought beings that wish to destroy the earth in order to use it as a breeding ground for long-thought-extinct dragons. Women dominate these texts and often act as co-protagonists in this complex and convoluted universe. Liz and Lucy are the asexual—born of dragon magic, not of men—decedents of the

woman who laid the last dragon to rest, and their evil "aunt," the main antagonist, both helps and hinders them in their attempts to keep the spirit of dragons alive. David is the hero of these texts, yet it is clear that without the power of these maternal relationships, he would be absolutely useless. However, it is he and his father figure who have the ability to literally write the future as they see fit, giving them control and true power, even as their power is siphoned off of the women surrounding them. Finally, the end of the series removes women from meaningful power in ways that affirm traditional, sexist values instead of challenging them.

The final series I investigate for this thesis is Nix's 2003 *The Keys to the Kingdom* books, which center around Arthur Penhaligon, the "chosen one" who fights the denizens of eternity and eventually become a new god. In this series, god is a woman known as The Architect. She built the universe, is tired, and wants to die, but doing so would end the universe she created. She is positioned as an all-powerful being, yet the entire series hinges on her not being able to accomplish the one thing she truly desires. It is up to the hero, Arthur, to accomplish this mission. A hapless boy who would have died if not rescued by magical means, Arthur stumbles his way through the first several books where Suzy and Leaf, his two female sidekicks, have to keep him alive and on track. At the end of the series Arthur becomes god and, after being forced to destroy creation, recreates the universe just as it had been. He leaves all systems of power and injustice in place within the physical universe but eliminates the metaphysical obstacles he needed to overcome on his personal journey. He upholds the earthly systems that gave him power, but does not remove any obstacles for others once he has the power to do so.

Each series has its own distinct narrative style and features different methods of focalization. *The Inheritance Cycle* is told in third-person, as focalized through the main character Eragon or his cousin Roran. Sometimes, in later novels, women's voices, such as Saphira the dragon, or Nasuada, leader of the rebellion, are the focalizing agent, but for the vast majority of the text, it is told through a male lens. *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* is narrated in first-person by the titular character, who acts as both hero and narrator of his own story. Readers only get to hear what he allows us to hear and the books are soaked in middle-grade humor, a combination that creates a limited perception of the female characters we meet. In the beginning of *The Last Dragon Chronicles,* readers only get to see the world as focalized through David's experience, as the third-person narration stays firmly anchored with him. However, in later books, many other characters get to share in the focalizing power. Finally, *The Keys to the Kingdom* is written in third-person and focalized through its hero, Arthur, and occasionally through his female sidekicks. By analyzing the effects of narration and focalization, I hope to show that the patterns I am addressing are not merely a result of literary genre but also reflect some larger cultural and narrative structures surrounding storytelling.

Why Are All My Authors Men?

All the authors of the series I have chosen to investigate are men, and one may wonder why I have chosen such a narrow constraint for my primary texts. When I was first thinking of which texts to include, choosing series by men was not a criterion. However, as my ideas for this project began to coalesce, I noticed all the texts that best exemplified Hermione Syndrome, and also fit my other criteria, were written by men. Upon further

reflection, this gender similarity among authors is not in any way surprising. First, most speculative fiction is written by men, and since Tolkien is credited with starting the modern fantasy genre, his masculine writing and influence essentially gendered a genre, or at least what is thought of as marketable in the genre. It is no coincidence that J. K. Rowling chose to initially disguise her gender by using only her initials and not her full name. Many readers assumed her male simply by default. Second, the texts I examine were some of the most popular and best-selling series at the time of their publication (other than *Harry Potter*), which reflects a children's and YA literature industry that is biased toward publishing male authors they feel will earn them a profit. Since male authors are more likely to have boys be their protagonist and to relegate girls and women to supporting roles, Hermione Syndrome, originally and ironically created by a woman author, is often the result.

The popular series I analyze reflect a major trend in children's and YA fantasy literature during post-Potter boom. Further, by having all my authors share the same gender, it allows me to investigate the ways in which the texts help support the authors' own power as male writers within a patriarchal society. While my focus will not be on the authors but their work, I think it is important not to forget the places of privilege from which these texts come.

Literature Review of Secondary Sources

Another reason I wish to examine these series is because there has been very little scholarship critically analyzing them. As previously stated, children's and YA fantasy is one of the least investigated literary genres by academics, and much of the literature that does exist focuses on a narrow range of texts. Because there are so few academic works devoted to

these series, my analyses synthesize sources from a wide variety of other disciplines, such as gender studies, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and the wider realms of children's, YA, and adult literature studies. One text that does similar work to what I hope this thesis accomplishes is Lori Campbell's *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantasy,* where she collects essays that critique supposed feminist characters or ones that show how some side-characters are more heroic than the male protagonists in their narratives. While I do not agree with all of the conclusions drawn by this work, it has been incredibly helpful for me in framing ideas about power, representation, narrative form, and the narrative subversion needed to challenge the patriarchal structures of both the fantasy worlds we are examining and the patriarchal world we ourselves live within. Another book I found helpful in framing my own ideas and arguments was Stephen M. Zimmerly's *The Sidekick Comes of Age: How Young Adult Literature is Shifting the Sidekick Paradigm*, but I do not directly quote from it within this thesis. I do enter into conversation with works by other scholars, such as Joseph Campbell, Roberta Seelinger Trites, Jacqueline Rose, Margery Hourihan, and Maria Nikolajeva, to form the theoretical basis for my arguments.

Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* has been applied to almost every genre of literature and storytelling, and it has nearly become a parody in the field of children's literature. Fantasy is no exception and may even be the genre that best supports the framework he defined. However, in this thesis I do not want to rehash how heroes go about their journey, but instead I want to consider how the hero affects those who surround him. Since Campbell is not nearly as concerned with secondary characters, or girls and women in general, I use him sparingly to investigate how various Hermione-esque characters often walk the same heroic path but are excluded from the power that comes from the journey. I

rely more heavily on scholarship that speaks on who can and cannot be the hero of a narrative journey and who must take on secondary roles as a result. Roberta Seelinger Trites' *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* and Margery Hourihan's *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature* are cornerstones for my argument and are essential for entering into a lively conversation with Campbell.

Trites and Hourihan help to explain who in a narrative holds power, who does not, and how power functions. For example, Hourihan argues that Western culture is based on the notion of opposed dualities existing in a hierarchical structure, which places those already with power as rightfully and naturally above those without (4-6). She writes that such structures tell "how women are designed to serve [men], and how those women who refuse to do so are threats to the natural order and must be controlled" (1). While I argue that none of the authors whose texts I am examining would profess this sexist belief, or even consider themselves to hold it, their male hero centric texts often prop up this cultural relationship. Similarly, Trites argues that YA literature is not focused on growth, as many believe, but instead is focused on the "gradations from power and powerlessness" that we interpret as growth (x). She argues that closure, the end of a narrative, determines a text's subversion or preservation or existing power structures. In the fantasy series covered in this thesis, at their closure, the "chosen one" almost always holds god-like power and the women who were his betters in the beginning must be subservient to him in order to have a place in his world. In some cases, they attempt to remove him from the world for being too powerful, and it is only his mercy and goodness that allows them to retain their power, which means, of course, that they never truly held power in the first place.

Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Literature* and Maria Nikolajeva's *Power, Voice, and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* examine authorial and narratological power. These texts both support the idea that when writing for children, authors are attempting to exert their power over their readers to obtain a desired effect. Rose argues that authors create child characters that both reflect and construct who they think their audience, the child, may be: "If children's fiction builds an image of the child within the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp" (2). This then begs the question of who these fantasy authors believe their reader to be. As they are all men, and share the inherent male-privilege granted by the patriarchy, might their books inadvertently work to uphold the self-fulfilling ideology of male dominance? And, even if this is not the author's intent, if their works end up recreating systems where men remain in power, are the authors reinforcing the patriarchy they seem to be arguing against by creating strong female characters? Even when fantasy authors try to create feminist worlds with empowered characters, the genre conventions they are writing within may limit their attempts to represent underrepresented identities. Tory Young's article "Invisibility and Power in the Digital Age: Issues for Feminist and Queer Narratology" argues that the mere visibility, or presence, of strong minority characters does not mean those characters are empowered (1005). Because there are so few academic studies of the series I write about in this thesis, I rely on works focused generally on narrative, power, and representation in order to construct most of my arguments.

For example, when researching Paolini's *Inheritance Cycle,* I came upon a true dearth of scholarship, as best witnessed through Laura Ann D'Aveta's dissertation on the series' use

of maps. Her 2016 dissertation is more than 150 pages long with 84 cited sources, none of which are academic sources focused on her primary texts. Similarly, I was not able to find any academic writing on the series, which is surprising considering its use in schools and the ways in which it impacted the industry by being one of the few self-published best sellers of the decade. This lack of scholarship is reflective of both the academy's position on children's and YA fantasy and also its stance on work published by child authors, as the author was 15 when he wrote the first book. I was able to find passing mentions of the series in Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James' *A Short History of Fantasy,* where they label it "The best known quest fantasy of the decade" as they deride it for being unoriginal and derivative of the form (210). They do point out that "this book aroused adoration from younger readers and loathing from experienced fantasy readers" (210) and seem to firmly plant themselves in the camp of loathing by discussing it side-by-side with pedantic far-right Christian narratives and regressive versions of history. However, they also acquiesce that the series was beloved by child readers and, for many, was their first foray into high fantasy.

Book reviews of the series were mixed, with the only universal opinion being that the 2006 film version of the first book was an affront not only to viewers but the series itself (Osmond 53). Most reviews of the first text, *Eragon,* showed hope for this new sword-and-sorcery quest, but as the years went on, and the trilogy turned into a four-part series, reviewers become more critical of the author and his ability to write concisely. By the end of the series, reviewers were mentioning the length of the text—"850 page tome" (Burkam 108) —more than the actual plot of the final installment. One editor even made a joke about reviewing it himself since he could not in good conscience make someone else read such a book over their Christmas break (Brown 56). He also gives a good summation of much of the

criticism surrounding *The Inheritance Cycle,* stating that it "will convert no-one to dragonesque fantasy but fans will love it" (Brown 56).

Fan art and activity on the author's (and his sister's) Twitter pages also show the undying fan-love this series has. A favorite character of the series, Angela the Herbalist, is based on the author's sister by the same name. Angela Paolini holds a unique amount of sway over this character, even writing from Angela's perspective in a recently published collection of short stories set in Alagasiea, Paolini's fantasy world. Looking at her Twitter, alongside that of her brother's, one can see they firmly believe that the series is feminist and that their leading lady, Ayra, Eragon's elf mentor and love interest, is to be seen as a fierce feminist warrior. When one fan tweeted "Never gonna get over the fact that Arya's simplified backstory is: got a tattoo, ran off with boyfriend, kicked ass, pissed off mom @paolini" (@emilyofarden), Christopher Paolini replied in under an hour: "Killed a Shade, killed a dragon, became a Rider and became a queen. Mom might finally be proud" (@paolini), which was followed by a slew of other fans attacking the first fan for airing her opinion on the character. One fan even replied, "no one does #subtlefeminism like Paolini" (@pine_whines). Clearly, many fans think, or very much want to think, that this series is feminist, and since the academy has turned a blind eye to it, I feel like an ideal space has opened for me to join this discussion and examine the characters, how they represent gender and power, and how they perpetuate—or in some instances fight against—Hermione Syndrome.

Of all the series I am examining, Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* has by far the most scholarly literature written on it. A breakthrough in giving children access to the "high culture" of Greek mythology, this series is simultaneously praised and criticized in the

academy. A large range of disciplines have written on this series, ranging from education to classical studies to disabilities studies. In her article "Classics for Cool Kids: Popular and Unpopular Versions of Antiquity for Children," Sheila Murnaghan criticizes Riordan for "gratifying the subversive pleasure-seeking child" while not doing enough to educate "the reluctant proto-adult" reader (348). She claims Riordan is bringing down the classics to children instead of elevating children to the level of the original classic texts. Of the classics scholars who have written on the series, this seems to be a standard opinion, and that the middle-grade humor only works to bring the myths down without giving children access to the social capital associated with knowing these ancient stories (353).

Other scholars writing from education and disabilities studies have high praise for the books as they claim that the texts help students be more creative, teach code-switching skills (Ford), and depict positive role-models for students with disabilities (Hawkins). What both these authors point out is that Riordan's texts are incredibly accessible to their readers and that children reading these texts are exposed to honest, flawed heroes in which almost anyone can see themselves. Almost every main character has a form of ADD, ADHD, or a learning disability, since their brains have been hard-wired for ancient Greek. Therefore, students with similar disabilities get to see heroic representations of themselves in this series. In Anne Morey's and Claudia Nelson's "A God Buys Us Cheeseburgers: Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson Series and America's Culture Wars" and Lily Glasner's "Taking a Zebra to Vegas: Allegorical Reality in the Percy Jackson & the Olympians Series," they agree with other critics that the books are accessible, quality literature for young readers. They also agree that the hero characters are, by and large, good, helpful people that children would not be amiss to emulate. Where they find flaws in the series is in their inherently conservative message of

"saving" Western civilization from regressing to a pre-America point. They point out that

Riordan uses national monuments to show the importance of keeping a colonized nation

under the control of those already in power (Nelson 249) and that the patriarchy of the texts

is reflective of that of the Western world, even though the texts attempt to be progressive

(Glasner 165).

Once again, turning to an author's Twitter account, we can see Riordan's intent to be

a progressive children's writer. His most famous "clap back" to homophobic parents, many

of whom attacked him after he had a fan-favorite character come out as gay in one of his later

books, shows he truly intends to include "marginalized people" (@camphalfblood) in his

work in a positive light, even including the hashtag #allkidsdeserverepresentation (see fig. 1).

Figure 1. Riordan replying to a parent's homophobic comment on his Twitter page, July 28, 2018.

Riordan uses language of inclusion and diversity to show that he values representing children of many different backgrounds over the impact such representation might have on the monetary success of his books. While this tweet is concerned with a sequel series to the one I investigate in this thesis, Riordan has always been vocal about his intentions to include far more people in the heroic role than traditional storytelling allows for. It is also clear, that just like Paolini, Riordan believes he has written a progressive, feminist story, even as characters in the *Percy Jackson* series fall prey to Hermione Syndrome in the service of Percy's calling as the "chosen one."

Unlike Riordan's work that has been examined through multiple theoretical lenses, Chris D'Lacey's *The Last Dragon Chronicles* has been ignored by the academy entirely. Even book reviews of the series are hard to find for the later and less popular books in the series. While the first three texts received high praise and good sales, the series lost much of its popularity with the fourth book, and sales dwindled until the final, seventh novel, even though they remained profitable enough to justify runs in both the UK and US markets. One reason I argue that there is no scholarship on this series, beyond the already stated lack of interest in fantasy literature held by the academy, is that the most interesting shifts in power within the text happen after they became less popular. One key component that may explain the series' dwindling popularity might be that the first three books have a male hero, but women take over as the main actors in the fourth and fifth books. The subversive actions of the girls and women in these texts truly start making an impact on their world in the later novels and, while these moments are indeed worthy of academic scrutiny, it is exactly when these women come into their power that the series lost its mainstream popularity.

For example, one book reviewer of the first novel, *The Fire Within,* praises Lucy, a prominent Hermione-shaped character, for being "appealingly strong-willed" (Meister 158) and the same reviewer points out that in the second book in the series new powerful women keep joining the text (Meister 132). A different reviewer, also using language referring to power when reviewing the third book, states, "[Aliens] have possessed Gwilanna, Liz's powerful and malevolent relative…" (Rawlins 130). At the turn of the fourth book, reviewers start mentioning that readers need to "read all the books in the series in order to grasp the evolution of the plot" (Frank 98) and that the books are "difficult to judge alone as [they are] so much part of a sequence" (Roe 98). In my research, I was only able to find a handful of reviews for the last book, compared to countless for the first, and one said "the ending…is only somewhat convincing. Despite some plot holes here and there, series fans will appreciate the closure" (Klem 65). It seems too much of a coincidence that exactly when the series begins to focus more on girls and women as complex, nuanced actors in their world, that revivers shift their writing to be critical of how difficult the series is to understand. Reviews almost unanimously hold this opinion, but based on an interview I conducted with him, the author himself seems to have been very intentional in his choice to move toward more nuanced and female focused writing.

A more private and less popular author than the others I discuss, D'Lacey does have a Twitter account, but it is not verified by the site as he has less than 2,000 followers. In a recent reply to a tweet reviewing book four, *The Fire Eternal,* D'Lacey writes, "This is one of my favourites of the series. It was great to be concentrating on the female leads rather than David for once…" (@chrisdlacey). To me, this shows that he was intentional about trying to include the voices of women in these texts even if he did not always succeed. I speculate that

when the hero makes his mainstage return the series in the sixth book, and dominates much of the final text, it show D'Lacey writing back toward the traditional formula that led to the series original popularity. Even as he says his favorite books to write are the ones that focus on the women on this world, he does not keep writing that way, but instead returns to more traditional storytelling for his ending.

My final series, *The Keys to the Kingdom*, arguably has the most beloved and written about author of those I research: Garth Nix. This series, though, is not his most popular, nor was it the one he first wrote and gained credibility with. While there are articles about him as a prominent fantasy writer and about his most famous work, *Sabriel,* the series I examine seems to have only one academic piece written on it. Sabriel of *The Old Kingdom* series has been widely praised as a feminist character in a feminist text, so one might assume that proceeding novels would also follow that pattern, but Hermione Syndrome is sneaky and works its way into well-intentioned author's works. Whereas *The Old Kingdom* has a feminine-focused return to power, *The Keys to the Kingdom* focuses on a feminine abdication of power. While both are coming-of-age stories, the protagonists inherit their power differently, with Sabriel fighting for hers and Arthur being randomly selected as the "chosen one." Nix, usually a vocal author on his writing process and thoughts behind world building, seems to have never explicitly discussed his character choices for *The Keys to the Kingdom.*

While Nix talks about enjoying writing *The Keys to the Kingdom* (Nix, *Locus*), he does not speak too much about the books. Nor are they his most popular works. They are, however, a close reflection of how he sees fantasy literature operating in relationship to the real world. Nix writes, "it's wrong to call fantasy world hermetically sealed. I do not think you could create a hermetically sealed fantasy world, because they all draw on real things—

on the real world, history, myth, and so on" (Nix, *Locus* 77). It is clear that Nix knows that

our real world influences the fantasy realms he creates, but I wonder how much he considers

the impact his fantasy worlds have on our own? With the exception of *Sabriel,* that question

goes largely unanswered by both Nix and the academy.

I was only able to find a single academic article that critically examines *The Keys to

the Kingdom*, which, serendipitously, focuses on gender. In chapter 4, I enter into dialog with

Lori Campbell's "And *Her* Will Be Done: The Girls Trump the Boys in *The Keys to the

Kingdom* and *Abhorsen* Series by Garth Nix," as she and I seem to have different views on

the representation and use of labor as power within these texts. While she claims that since

the women who help the main character, Arthur, are better at everything than he is (211) and

one is even revealed to be the Will of the Creator (209), that they hold more power than he

does and should be seen as feminist heroes. I disagree and argue that this is exactly what

Hermione Syndrome perpetuates, that women who could, and logically should, be the heroes

of their world, are relegated to serving a less heroic, less viable, and less interesting "chosen

one" in order to save their world.

Thesis Overview

Chapter 1, "Inheriting the Hero Narrative: Christopher Paolini's *The Inheritance

Cycle* and the Form of Fantasy," investigates the narrative role of the hero through an

amalgamation of theory pulled from Campbell, Rose, Trites, and Hourihan. I examine the

isolated centrality of the hero and show how his placement as the moral standard of a text

impacts the girls and women surrounding him in negative ways. I also discuss the inherent

power of focalization and representation within a fantasy narrative.

In Chapter 2, "When Staying at Home in the Kitchen Saves the World: Binary Options of Mothering in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*," I examine how Hermione Syndrome limits the options girls and women have within fantasy series. One option that always seems to be open and encouraged for both women and girls is to adopt the role of mother. As I look into the cultural role of mothers and mothering in *Percy Jackson*, I rely mostly upon Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Using this as a framework, I show how, regardless of other roles and responsibilities, girls and women are always judged by their willingness to mother the hero.

Chapter 3, "Sometimes we Succeed and Sometimes we Sabotage our Best Intentions: The Backwards Power of Closure in Chris D'Lacey's *The Last Dragon Chronicles*," focuses on the ways the closure of a narrative impacts the meaning of a text. While a story may be progressive and subversive, the ending can create a return to normalcy that undermines its previous forward movement. Using Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* and ideas surrounding power and narrative closure, I examine how D'Lacey's work creates a backwards rupture, undermining the progressive, feminist message his text had been supporting.

In my final chapter, "'She Wasn't Even in that Book:'" Re-reading Garth Nix's *The Keys to the Kingdom*," I pivot away from looking at the text as my primary subject and instead investigate the relationship between reader and text. Using frameworks of power as elucidated by Michel Foucault in conjunction with reader response theory and research from developmental psychology, I attempt to bring Hermione Syndrome off the page and show how it also exists in the minds of readers and in the dominate ideology of our world.

Finally, the Conclusion of this thesis looks at newer fantasy narratives that attempt to push back against the underpinning structures of Hermione Syndrome. Using Disney's 2014 film *Maleficent* as a touchstone, I explore which narrative tools can be used to question dominate ideology surrounding girls and women, without falling victim to Hermione Syndrome. I end by speculating on connections between real-world and fictional "Hermiones," asking what can be done to uplift both.

Chapter 1: Inheriting the Hero Narrative:

Christopher Paolini's *The Inheritance Cycle* and the Form of Fantasy

I begin with a chapter focused on *The Inheritance Cycle* by Christopher Paolini because it is a perfect example of a text rife with Hermione Syndrome, a literary trend I defined in my introduction. *The Inheritance Cycle* is made up of four books, *Eragon* (2002), *Eldest* (2005), *Brisingr* (2008), and *Inheritance* (2011). Each are filled with female characters who are shown to have more ability and power than the protagonist, Eragon, but who never take on the mantle of hero for themselves. Paolini was only 15 years old when he started writing *Eragon,* which was later published by his family's company. When he was 19, Knopf Publishing picked up the series which became popular enough to be included on the *New York Time's* Children's Best Sellers List. Every successive novel in the series also hit that list, and while the critical reception for each book became less and less enthusiastic (Burns 196, Brown 56), the fan love of the series only grew with each new installment. Even though this was one of the most purchased YA fantasy series of early 21st Century, no academic research has been published on these texts, past noting their popularity at that time (Mendlesohn 210, Levy 168).

The basic plot of this immersive fantasy series, which totals about 4,000 pages, is that approximately 100 years before the events of the books, an evil, immortal Dragon Rider, Galbatorix, overthrew the ruling order of Alagaesia, the fantasy continent, and, through his evil magic, became humanity's dictator. As the novels progress, we learn that Galbatorix is working to bring the other fantasy creatures—elves, dwarves, werecats, and urgals—to heel as well. At the opening of the series, a teenage farm boy, Eragon, has a dragon egg magically appear before him in the woods. Soon after, his fully sentient dragon, Saphira, hatches—

unlocking and fueling Eragon's magical abilities. A wise, old storyteller takes Eragon on a journey that leads them to join the resistance against Galbatorix, the storyteller dies on the way, and Eragon finishes the mission with newfound companions. As the series progresses, Eragon is thrust into the magical, political, and mundane lives of hundreds of different characters, and through his and Saphira's growth, the resistance is eventually able to storm the castle of the king and, through a complex series of events, force the king to kill himself.

It is clear from this brief summary that *The Inheritance Cycle* is a formulaic bildungsroman, "chosen one" hero's tale where the protagonist must come of age and into his power in order to save the world. Much popular YA fantasy falls into this same formula, and Eragon's journey is similar to that of other well-loved fantasy heroes such as Frodo Baggins, Luke Skywalker, or Harry Potter. Since Christopher Paolini's *Inheritance Cycle* is a derivative amalgamation of older works of fantasy literature, this series can be used to investigate the conventions and tropes within the genre in general and to speculate if the genre of fantasy itself, or more specifically, the form of the hero narrative, is inherently sexist. Paolini, in borrowing from other fantasy narratives, also borrows sexist tropes that result in Eragon becoming both the hero and moral authority of the books, often as a direct result of the subjection of female characters. Within the Western hero narrative, specifically within "chosen one" narratives, the isolated centrality of the protagonist reflects a relentless focus on individualism. This emphasis on individualism pits the hero against all other characters within the text, even his allies, in order to prove that he is both worthy of being the "chosen one," and that, once he saves his world, it will be in a morally superior state. In order for the narrative to achieve traditional closure, all "others" must be subdued in service of the hero and his desire for a better world. In this case, those "others" are several powerful female

characters who must use their power to support Eragon's singular vison, or be seen as morally corrupt. As these powerful female characters submit to Eragon's will, they gain power but never reach equality. This "never enough" relationship between the hero and the women around him is a hallmark of Hermione Syndrome and will be the main focus of this chapter.

Paolini's Inspirations

Most of the critical writing on Paolini's work focusses on either its derivative nature or the divide it created generationally among fantasy readers. According to Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James' *A Short History of Fantasy,* the series "aroused adoration from younger readers and loathing from experienced fantasy readers" since it meets every qualification for high fantasy, but relies completely on common tropes of the genre with little original material (210). Mendllesohn and Michael Levy in *Children's Fantasy Literature: An Introduction* again note the derivative nature of Paolini's novels when they say the series is simply distilled nostalgia and that, even though it is unique in that it has a child author, it is just "more of the same" (168). Paolini himself even admits that many main premises of the books came from works he had read: The psychic link between dragon and riders originated in the *Dragon Riders of Pern* series, and the idea that a dragon egg would only hatch for one person came from *Jeremy Thatcher, Dragon Hatcher* (Paolini.net).

Some readers also complain about Paolini's derivative style, such as Wattpad author "matchstick" in their 2006 post "Eragon – Plagiarism Made Popular," which details exactly the ways in which the first book is unoriginal, specifically in the ways it takes ideas from Tolkien. From Paolini's use of Tolkienesk names, Eragon/Aaragon, Isenstar/Isengard,

Morgothal/Morgath, to the similarities between their prose, "matchstick" sees Paolini's work

as direct plagiarism. They conclude, "Not only is Eragon a bad book, but it relieves readers

in general (and children in particular) of the burden of knowing that books should be

original" (matchstick). Book reviewers seem split for the first two books in the series, some

calling them "lengthy and derivate fantasy novel[s] that often suffers from clichéd language"

(Del Negro 163), while others say they are "an auspicious beginning to both a career and a

series (Burns 196). However, in reviews of the final books in the series, reviewers have little

to say about the story and more to say about the author. Anita Burkam of *The Horn Book*

Guide has the kindest review of the final book, saying one can make it through the whole

850-page book because of "well-constructed cliffhangers, rock solid world building, and

[Paolini's] infectious enthusiasm" (108). A less kind review ends with "*Inheritance* will

convert no one to dragonesque fantasy but fans will love it" (Brown 56).

Fans do indeed love it. All books in the series sold incredibly well. When it was

initially released, the second book "sold more than 425,000 hardcover copies, making it the

biggest single-week sale ever recorded for a Random House Children's Books title" at the

time (Associated Press). When the series closed, countless news outlets, including both *The*

Guardian and *The Washington Post*, interviewed Paolini about the process he had gone

through writing the books over the past decade. There can be no argument that these books

were popular and well loved by their general audience, even while it is clear that there is little

original material to be found within their pages. Perhaps this formulaic, derivative form of

fantasy appeals to young readers who do not already have a large repertoire of fantasy novels

on which to draw. Aside from spurning questions about literary merit, Paolini's work can

also be used as a touchstone of the sort of YA fantasy readers wanted in the years immediately following the success of the *Harry Potter* books.

To make the claim that *The Inheritance Cycle* can be seen as an amalgamation of several other fantasy texts, it is important to note the books Paolini recommends and claims were an influence on him. Foundational, both for Paolini and fantasy literature itself, are J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings.* Middle Earth is the base-line modern fantasy world, and one will notice when reading any of Tolkien's work that there is a distinct lack of women. While there are hundreds of men in each book, the only women who garner a spot are either goddesses, mothers, brides, or women who enact traditionally masculine roles. None of the women of Middle Earth travel along the hero's journey, as that is a role reserved for the men within the text. While Bilbo, Frodo, and Aragorn go on grand adventures and must develop as characters in order to save their world, the only woman who goes on a hero's journey is, one might argue, Eowyn. Yet, even though she slays the Witch-King, she is a static character who does not develop. She is also a powerful woman who must give up her power at the end in order to marry Farimir, become his princess, and bear his children. Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* series was also an inspiration for Paolini, as seen in the magic systems used in both worlds and the dominance of male magic practitioners. *Redwall*, Brian Jacques' incredibly successful series, is also cited by Paolini as a fantastic series which he read and he claims other fantasy lovers should as well. Of J. K. Rowling's text, Paolini says, "And for heaven's sake read Harry Potter if you haven't already! That goes without saying at this point!" (Pauli).

Paolini treats his female characters in much the same way his inspirations do, and while he has far more women populating his world than Tolkien did, they go through

minimal character development throughout the series when compared to Eragon. For instance, the main woman within the series, Arya the elf warrior-princess and love interest, is much the same throughout the whole narrative, her only real development being directly related to the way she interacts with Eragon. Whereas Le Guin noticed the sexism within her books and pivoted to focalizing the narration through a female character in order to bring in a fresh perspective, Paolini firmly believes his work is already feminist and in no need of revision. When a twitter user cited some feminist flaws they saw in Arya, Paolini snapped back with all the character's accomplishments without addressing the underlying feminist critique (@paolini).

It is clear that Paolini had been inundated with the tropes and from of fantasy when he began to write his own narrative. We can also see the critiques of his inspirations being mirrored in the critiques of his own work. While the *Redwall* series has over 20 books, they are all formulaic, episodic quest narratives, a critique that Paolini's writing also received from book reviewers (Burkam 100). As mentioned in my introduction, *Harry Potter* has criticism that points out Hermione's lack of sisterhood with other women in the text, and Paolini mirrors that attitude in Arya's character. On three separate occasions, she makes sure to point out she is not like "helpless" human females and should not be treated as they are (*Eragon* 699, *Eldest* 463, *Brisingr* 145). However, the most blatant similarity between Paolini and his influences is their collective use of the Hero Narrative, or monomyth. As fantasy works often rely on this form of narrative, this structure must be investigated to ask if it is an intrinsically sexist form.

The Hero Narrative and Control

Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* identifies what he calls the monomyth, a word first coined by James Joyce, which is defined as the narrative pattern where a "hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (28). Campbell argues that this story has been retold throughout every culture and era of human history. Popular versions of this form today could be *Star Wars*, *The Hunger Games*, or any recent Disney princess movie. Paolini's work would also fit nicely into this classification, as well as the texts he lists as his inspirations. Campbell distilled his theory from the study of thousands of myths, legends, and stories from around the globe, and he claims that the patterns he finds are universal to every culture. However, he is researching from the mindset of a 20th century man while looking at stories from societies steeped in patriarchal values. I offer that Campbell's descriptive explanation of common tropes within narratives hides a more sinister prescriptive narrative formula for keeping power in the hands of men. Not only do hero narratives reflect the world they come from, they work to show such a system as natural, correct, and inevitable.

Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Literature* argues that when writing for children, authors often attempt to exert power over their readers to obtain a desired effect. Rose also argues that authors create children characters, and characters in general, that reflect who they think their audience, the child, should be. She writes, "If children's fiction builds an image of the child within the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so

easily within its grasp" (2). I offer that Rose's ideas can be applied directly to the hero narrative. Each time the story is told, even if the author does not fully realize it, they are attempting to bring their audience under the control of that narrative and the ideology therein. The power imbalances between the "chosen one" and the women around him will seem natural when told in this familiar form. It is only through careful investigation of these patterns that we can see them as tools used to continually oppress women, and others, outside of the texts as well as those inside.

Margery Hourihan looks at power imbalances within hero narratives in her book *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature.* She identifies the binaries Western culture is built around, and argues that through understanding what is "foreground, background, and omitted from" (4) hero narratives, we can unearth what part of those binaries heroes are allowed to exist within. These stories are so common, told and retold so many times, that they seem to be simple reflections of the way things are (14), naturalizing domination (17). As a result of this repetition, it comes to seem natural that, of course, the hero must be male, white, almost always young, come from civilization and go into the wild, and be able to overcome all obstacles because they are "strong, brave, resourceful, rational, and determined to succeed" (9). While women are usually part of the narrative, they exist only in relation to the hero, often with the purpose to support him as a mother, object of desire, or supernatural helper (76, 156). Conversely, women can be the hero's enemy, but never one who actually thwarts him, for that would upend the binary of male superiority (192). Women fall into the "wrong" side of these cultural binaries often, being both more linked to "nature" than "civilization" and, paradoxically, to "home" more than the adventurous "wilderness." Of women within the traditional hero narrative, Hourihan

says, "They are reduced to decorative presences, bright figures on the periphery of the structural pattern; action and accomplishment is seen to be the prerogative of males" (173). Hourihan argues to subvert the power of the hero narrative, we must not just change the stories but place narrative and real-world value on the subjugated sides of the binaries. Switching the gender of the protagonist cannot accomplish change without the underling structures changing too.

This narrative structure and the resulting binaries are present in Paolini's work, even if they are not obvious on the surface. The elves of his world are painted with a very feminine brush, to positive and negative effects. Elves are naturally the strongest species both physically and in magic (*Eragon 647*), but they are also in hiding, secluded in their forest paradise away from the evil king (*Eldest 328*). They are both domestic and wild, embodying the paradox Hourihan noted of womanhood in hero narratives. The text's most prominent elf, the princess Arya, a great warrior and Eragon's love interest, is most often described for her beauty, closely followed by a description of her prowess in battle. Arya is first introduced to the series in the prologue, where she is the "raven-haired elven lady," described as beautiful despite her unadorned clothes (*Eragon* 3). When captured by the main antagonist of the first novel, who is not human, "her beauty, which would have entranced any mortal man, held no charm over him" (*Eragon* 7). When Eragon has a prophetic dream about her (*Eragon* 309*)*, all he can recall is "the lighting was bad, yet [he] could tell that she was beautiful" (*Eragon* 350). When he first sees Arya in person, she is unconscious and he thinks her "exotic." He notes a long scar on her face but ignores it since "she was the fairest woman he had ever seen" (*Eragon* 431). However, beyond being beautiful, she is also one of the most powerful members of the resistance, or Varden, as Eragon learns when he tries to magically access her

thoughts in order to help her. As he enters her mind, he is batted away and she subdues him almost instantly with her mental prowess (*Eragon* 495).

This first meeting sets a sub-textual pattern for their relationship that restricts Arya from being Eragon's better. In their initial communication, Arya is paralyzed and physically unconscious, even as her mind is more active and powerful than Eragon's. Therefore, even as she has more power than him in some regard, he could, if he so chose, simply kill her or leave her behind. It is his paramount good character, and his infatuation with her beauty, that has him act the savior, thus setting up his role as moral leader of the text.

Some may argue that having a beautiful character does not make them inherently anti-feminist, and I would agree. Rita Felski writes in "Because it is Beautiful: New Feminist Perspectives on Beauty" that the "trajectory of feminist work on beauty has shown a distinct (though far from unanimous) shift from the rhetoric of victimization and oppression to an alternative language of empowerment and resistance" (280). According to Felski, there is nothing anti-feminist about being attractive. However, issues arise when beauty is the main, defining, and value-giving characteristic of a person. Arya has many positive qualities within this series; she is brave, strong, smart, and heroic, yet none of these are mentioned nearly as much as her beauty. Further, all of those other attributes need to be gleaned through interpreting her actions within the text, while readers are told repeatedly and directly that she is physically desirable. Therefore, while her beauty does not disqualify her from being a powerful character, it seems to be a hindrance since her characterization heavily hinges on her appearance.

Conversely, we get to know little about Eragon's appearance within the text, past that he is white, has brown eyes and dark eyebrows, and is of average height (*Eragon* 9). His

value does not stem at all from his appearance, but from his narrative position as the "chosen one." He is quite literally a "chosen one," as Saphira, while still in her egg, chooses to hatch for him after lying dormant for over 100 years (*Eragon* 54). As one of only two known living dragons, and the only one not enslaved by the evil king, Saphira is one of the most powerful creatures in their world. It is only her act of choosing of Eragon to be her rider that grants him any standing within this narrative. Therefore, Eragon owes his standing and access to power to a female character, yet that fact is never addressed within the text past Saphira using that as leverage when she is jealous of Eragon's romantic interest in other women (*Eldest* 101).

Hourihan goes into detail about the ways women are allowed entry into hero narratives, pointing out they can never exist outside of their relationship to the hero. They can be a mother, fairy godmother, virgin, bride, or monster (Hourihan 156-202), but they are never the hero. Eragon has no mother; she died soon after his birth. And while he spends time trying to replace her with other women, he never completes this quest, outside perhaps the maternal relationship he has with Saphira. Hourihan notes that, within a standard monomyth, fey characters (of which a dragon would be one) who are "powerful and autonomous" are changed into tools of the existing patriarchy to help the hero. However, they never enact any kind of social change that would challenge the status quo or their own status (170-180). Hermione Syndrome is, in part, characterized through the portrayal of strong female characters who willingly relinquish their power to the hero, rather than using it for social change such as helping to bring about a more feminist world. Female characters in *The Inheritance Cycle*, such as the herbalist Angela and the elf queen Islanzadi, enter the story as fairy godmother types, helping Eragon when he needs it, granting him boons and

wisdom, then getting out of his way so that he can fulfill his destiny to save the world. Both these women are far more powerful than Eragon, as shown when Islanzadi goes into battle (*Inheritance* 684) or when Angela is able to alter both space and time through magic (*Inheritance* 301). Yet the narrative cannot allow them to be the hero without undermining Eragon's position. In order to portray them unusable as heroes, Islanzadi is an overemotional ruler, turning her back on her allies and shunning her duty when personally offended (*Eldest* 342), and Angela is a poisoner who sneaks around to achieve what she wants (*Eldest* 931). I do not argue that these women do not hold power, but instead that the power they have is circumvented so that they can only morally use it to support the agenda of their male hero.

Nasuada and Elva are two other female characters who cannot be the hero, but the narrative still relies on them to support the "chosen one." Nasuada, the eventual leader of the Varden, gives Eragon the power he needs in order to succeed, even as the narrative seems to be arguing that it is Eragon who empowers her. When she is ascending to power, Eragon feels that the only way to keep her in power is to swear fealty to her, thus becoming her vassal and allegedly giving her power over him. However, it is only his action of swearing to her that gives her the political backing she needs in order to claim control of the Varden (Eldest 91). Conversely, without her excellent leadership, Eragon would have no army or infrastructure with which to attack the king. Even in the end, when Nasuada becomes queen of the empire, it is by the grace of Eragon choosing to not take the throne that she gains her power, even though it was her leadership of a nation-sized army that did most of the work. By the end of the series, Nasuada more closely aligns with the mother trope Hourihan identifies, as she takes on the care of an entire nation, putting herself at risk countless times for those she sees as her charges, including Eragon. However, the text still needs to heavy-

handedly makes sure readers know she is a single virgin, pining for a lover (*Inheritance* 803-809).

Elva, textually one of the most powerful entities in the world (*Inheritance* 419), seems to be allowed into the text as a moral foil to Eragon. She first appears in *Eragon* as an unnamed baby he bestows a blessing upon (*Eragon* 629). In *Eldest* it is revealed this blessing was misworded so Elva was actually cursed to shield all those around her from any pain they are about to experience, taking it on herself instead (*Eldest* 442). The magic makes her mature unnaturally fast, so at just a few months old she has the body of a six-year-old and the voice of an adult woman. While under the full curse, Elva is in constant torment, yet still acts as a secret bodyguard to Nasuada. However, when her curse is partially removed and her compulsion to help others is lifted, she leaves her duties, and makes her own life within the Varden (*Brisingr* 269). In the final book, she is asked to come on a mission, refuses, and a powerful ally of the Varden, Wyrden, dies. Afterwards, Eragon comes to her and accuses her of killing that ally, saying,

> If you had come with us, you could have warned him about the trap. …I watched Wyrden die… because of *you.* Because of your anger, because of your stubbornness. Because of your pride…Hate me if you will, but don't you dare make anyone else suffer for it. (*Inheritance* 337-338, emphasis in the original)

Eragon's chastisement seems to greatly effect Elva. She cries and apologizes to him, an apology that seems to carry more significance than just for this one event, but for any animosity she might hold towards him. It is only when she comes back into the good graces of the hero that she is once again seen in a sympathetic light. Her morality, it seems, is

dependent on her relationship with the hero—her abuser. Elva is a tool to be used by both the narrative and Eragon, a pet project that he can always feel morally superior to, even as all of the pain and suffering she endures is because of his hubris. Once again, a powerful girl must subjugate herself to the moral superiority of the hero, and this time it is even worse, since the hero who she must work with is the man who ruined her life.

Another archetype outlined as part of Hourihan's matrix is the bride, a character who derives all of her value and power from her status in relation to a male character. At least a fourth of the overall series is told from the perspective of Eragon's cousin, Roran, who sets out to rescue his betrothed, and ends up saving an entire village and becoming one of the world's greatest warriors. His eventual wife, Katrina, only functions in the story to motivate Roran toward his own greatness. The narrative is even explicit about where her worth comes from, saying, "What Roran had done on her behalf elevated her far above ordinary women; it made her an object of mystery, fascination, and allure to the warriors" (*Brisingr* 122).

Arya also gains much of her access to the narrative through her role as Eragon's love interest, a love she does not requite. It is clear Arya is Eragon's superior in the beginning of the series, and yet his position as the "chosen one" allows him to override her choices whenever he feels like that is the correct thing to do. Just as the power dynamic in their initial meeting is unbalanced in his favor, his political standing as the only free Dragon Rider throughout the rest of the series places him above her. Therefore, even as he harasses her over the course of four novels, she has no choice but to lightly rebuke him, but ultimately take it.

I use the word harass specifically because, when these books were written, the behavior Eragon displays towards Arya might have been seen as that of a doting admirer, but

now in the #metoo era, we can clearly name it harassment. Arya makes it blatantly clear that nothing can happen between them as they are different species, she is more than 80 years his elder, and she simply does not have a romantic interest in him (*Eldest* 462, 710). Regardless, Eragon doggedly goes after her, always thinking of her as the object of his affection. One poignant example of his infatuation is manifested when he literally objectifies Arya by creating a magical painting of her where it is clear he sees her through a romantic lens (*Eldest* 580). In his inner dialog, readers know he sees her as "mysterious, exotic, and the most beautiful woman he had ever seen" (*Eldest* 579). When Arya sees the image, Eragon witnesses "cords and veins ridge her hands as she clenches the slate" before smashing it and leaving without a word (*Eldest* 580). Horrified by what he has done, Eragon promises to never do such a thing again (*Eldest* 584), but he continues to pine, seek after, and badger her into giving him the romantic fulfillment he craves. I argue this fits the definition of harassment. Further, Eragon's actions removes Arya from power as she is often the object of Eragon's affection, and not her own fully autonomous person. Just as simply being beautiful does not remove one from being a feminist character, neither should being the victim of harassment.

Problematically, their relationship must be renegotiated once again after a work of magic makes Eragon no longer a full human, but a half-human, half-elf hybrid (*Eldest* 797). Eragon feels like this change should make it so he and Arya can be together, yet she still thinks it would be inappropriate, both politically and because she does not have feelings for him. Eragon pursues her over the first three books, and when it is clear she will never reciprocate his feelings, he resigns himself to loneliness. However, as the series ends, and it appears they may never see each other again, they undergo a ritual of extreme intimacy that

far outstrips any kind of sexual encounter they could have. In the narrative, one's "true name" is a magical phrase that perfectly describes one in pure honesty. Knowing someone's true name allows one to have complete control over the other person and disclosing it to someone is the ultimate show of trust and love. As it seems they will no longer see each other, Eragon makes a second, more respectful magical painting of Arya, and when she sees it, she offers to tell him her true name. He accepts and tells her his true name as well. Once the exchange is over, he admits he still loves her, and she gently refuses, not for her lack of feelings, which seem to appear out of nowhere, but because she is now queen and must not be tied to him for political reasons. She does however reach for his hand, and they share a physically manifested moment of innocent intimacy (*Inheritance* 800-801). In the end, while he does not get to act on his full desire, it seems to be rewarded by the text. His feelings are seen as valid, and the work he put into pursuing her was not in vain, for she too, eventually, returns his affection. Her sudden change of heart in the final book seems to be a product of both fulfilling a romantic trope but also a means by which Eragon can dodge any tarnish to his morality, even as he was the aggressor in their romantic relationship.

Truly, morality—an adherence to the value system of the series' fictional world—seems to be the only aspect of life where Eragon can be Arya's equal, and often her superior. While Eragon does occasionally make choices readers see as mistakes, he is the moral standard for the series as his honor is impeccable, he always pays his debts, and he always makes amends for any harm he causes. Once, as they are fighting a group of soldiers, Arya asks why he can kill them, but could not kill a man, Sloan, who derailed a previous mission. Eragon replies that the soldiers were "a threat, Sloan wasn't. Isn't it obvious?" to which Arya replies, "It ought to be, but it isn't. …I am ashamed to be instructed in morality by one with

so much less experience. Perhaps I have been too certain, too confident of my own choices" (*Brisingr* 185). Here the text clearly argues that teenage Eragon is the moral superior of a battle-scarred rebel who has been fighting against a despot for nigh 100 years. We can see that Eragon is in control of what the texts name as moral, and he is individually responsible for making sure others behave in the same way he would.

The Limits of Representation

While it is clear that there are countless women inhabiting Alagaesia, Paolini's world, as Tory Young's article "Invisibility and Power in the Digital Age: Issues for Feminist and Queer Narratology" points out, mere representation does not equate to power (991). In the series, female characters are warriors, queens, gifted magicians, fearless leaders, and the inheritors of an empire. However, with the closure of the novels, none of those people have a choice but to obey Eragon as he ascends to practical godhood (*Inheritance* 782, 805*)*, effectively nullifying any gains made by those beneath him. Simply having women in places of power is not enough, especially when that power is a gift from a man who can take it away whenever he wants.

Roberta Seelinger Trites' *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* looks at growth and power in YA novels. Trites claims that growth in YA narratives comes not from aging, but from characters understanding how power works, and where they fall within that nexus of power (Trites x). She writes, "protagonists must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are" (3). By the end of Paolini's series, Eragon not only fully understands how power works within his world, but also how to control it. Trites heavily uses Foucault's theories of power, specifically the distinction

between the power to do something, and the power to stop someone else from acting upon you (4). At the end of the series, Eragon has achieved the ultimate in both types of power. He is one of two people who know a magical world powerful enough to control the essence of reality, and he is the only one with the magical backing of dragons (*Inheritance* 739). While Eragon has achieved both types of power, the women who propelled him to that place can only be seen as holding a power to do, not the power from being acted upon. They can act however they want within their own domains, but they will always be subjected to whatever the "chosen one" enacts, as his power is conferred both within the plot and through the structure of the hero narrative.

In a final act of apparent goodness and self-sacrifice, Eragon leaves Alagaesia altogether, simultaneously consolidating his power while appearing to give it up. Nasuada recognizes that magic is the greatest divide in power among the people of Alagaesia, as those without it are doomed to be subjected to those with it. Therefore, she devises a plan to regulate magic in order to make it as safe and benign as possible (*Inheritance* 782, 805). Learning he may have to give up some of his god-like power in order to live within society, Eragon and Saphira both decide it is better for them to simply leave altogether, having a distant relationship with the land they just saved. It seems that when the male hero is asked to undergo an aspect of Hermione Syndrome, giving up power for the betterment of the world, he balks to the point of fleeing that world rather than limit his own power (*Inheritance* 801).

Trites also points out that power in YA fantasy is often cyclical, in that young heroes often inherit the power of others without dismantling or changing the systems that gave them that power (45). This occurs at the end of Paolini's novels when the empire the rebellion overthrew does not change, but instead names Nasuada as its new queen. Readers believe she

will be a better ruler than Galbatorix, yet she does not attempt to overthrow any systems of power that oppress others, with the exception of trying to regulate magic. As Hourihan points out, women within hero narratives are not permitted to try to change the status quo (170-180). It seems like Paolini takes that stance and applies it to all his characters, not allowing any systematic change to take place, past changing the face of power. While readers can see women represented as having power, they never use that power in a way that positively affects those being oppressed, therefore never using their power in a meaningful way.

Conclusion

Levy and Mendlesohn claim, "The children of fantasy prior to 1950 *were children*. Those afterwards were…*Old Ones*, simultaneously children and carrier of adult responsibilities" (Levy 108, emphasis in the original) and that "fantasy literature has become a place where teens can play at the kind of adolescences their grandparent's might have lived" (210). While fantasy does allow readers a level of exploration and freedom, differing levels of freedom for each reader must be made clear. The freedom current YA generation's grandmothers had differed greatly from the freedom their grandfathers had. And I argue this split is seen in the ways women and girls must still read YA fantasy literature. They must read themselves into a male hero, whereas young, white men can see themselves growing and inheriting the world over and over again.

YA fantasy could be a realm of exploration as Levy and Mendelsohn claim, but the power to play within these worlds is always already shackled with the power structures that helped create that world. Readers are expected to take the victory of the hero as an absolute victory for the world, and thus dragging along behind it a trail of sexism (as well as racism

and homophobia) that readers also interpolate. As Maria Nikolajeva states in *Power, Voice, and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*, fantasy "is a highly efficient strategy of empowering a child" (17), and when the hero is a "chosen one," he comes into the story so well equipped that his victory seems a narratological guarantee rather than a battle (18). When readers cannot see themselves as the "chosen one," due to falling on the "wrong" sides of Hourihan's binaries—female, non-white, older—they know they are not given those same privileges as the hero and know they cannot hold that title in the same way he does. Nikolajeva uses Harry Potter as her example, stating he gets his cloak, map, broom, and wand, alongside characters like Hermione and Ron who make up for all his character flaws, making him best equipped to handle the antagonist (18). He is the hero and therefore seemingly deserves all of the support he receives, support that makes it seem natural that he is the hero. In reality he is just a boy who could not succeed without the complicated amalgam of Others who are pushing him forward. Eragon follows this same pattern with Saphira's boon of magic granting him access to a world of power, a magical bloodline, and a cohort of Others who make his journey to success possible. Both of these boys inherit the world laid out before them, partially due to their own efforts, but in large part due to the labor of the women surrounding them, women who do not get to receive nearly as much reward as the hero for completing his mission.

These patterns then beg the question—can a traditional hero narrative function without these sexist tropes upholding it, or are all monomyths destined to repress women? Hourihan contends that having a female hero is not enough to counteract the force of the monomyth, and that the underlying binaries must be addressed in order to create a new kind of protagonist (203). Undermining the value of these binaries could create a story that is so

unlike the hero's journey that we would hardly recognize it, yet this seems to be the solution

Hourihan advocates for. Paolini seems to think that representing women in power might be

enough to create a feminist text, but it is not. He even aims to tell the story through female

characters at certain times in order to bring a different light to the narrative, but this effort

also fails.

One environment in which Hermione Syndrome thrives seems to be narratives where

the action is focalized through men. As Young notes, the way narratives are focalized

operates much in the same way as the "gaze" of film. Those watching have more power than

those being watched, or in narrative form, those telling have more power than those who are

being reported on (994). *The Inheritance Cycle* is told in third person, but always focalized

through one of four main characters: Eragon, Roran, Nasuada, or Saphira. Eragon has by far

the most sections written from his perspective. The entire first book, with the exception of

the prologue, is from his perspective. In books two through four, about a third of the text is

focalized through Roran. Nine out of hundreds of sections throughout the whole series are

focalized through Nasuada. And while these sections would hopefully help alleviate some of

the negative effects of Hermione Syndrome, four of those nine sections focus on her either

mutilating herself (*Brisingr* 105) or being tortured to the point that her only discernable

quality is that of resilience and the ability to withstand pain (*Inheritance* 442).

It would seem that Paolini attempted to subvert some of Hourihan's binaries in the

closure of his work, as the human empire shifts from male to female domination and a more

traditionally feminine style of government is imposed. However, since the functionality of

this government rests solely on Eragon's choice to let it run without his interference, it hardly

carries the same weight as an independent enterprise. Truly, it seems that any attempt to

subvert these binaries is thwarted through the character of Eragon whose position of godhood

links all of his identity categories, the traditional side of the binaries, to the morally superior,

and "correct" side of the narrative. Without someone being able to claim any kind of power

over Eragon, readers have no choice but to accept that who he is, and who he represents

outside of the text, are inevitably the rightful heirs to power. Women then are left with the

option of either falling outside of the hero's circle—either into obscurity or villainy—or of

being a helpful, mothering, domestic servant simply waiting to help the next boy ascend into

manhood and power.

Chapter 2: When Staying at Home in the Kitchen Saves the World:

Binary Options of Mothering in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*

Rick Riordan's popular series of books on Greek mythology is another post-*Harry Potter* fantasy text featuring female characters infected with Hermione Syndrome. Ancient Greek myths had a mainstage revival with Riordan's 2005-2009 *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series wherein the titular Percy must claim his birthright as a son of Poseidon and save Western culture. Riordan adapts Greek myths for a contemporary audience, a tradition, I argue, that illuminates more about the 21st century Riordan is writing in than the time of the original myths. Riordan's series is packed with characters created in ancient times, yet they are all superficially updated with contemporary characteristics—Medusa owns a garden gnome emporium, Poseidon dresses in Bermuda shorts and Hawaiian shirts—that Riordan explains by saying that both the gods and their enemies move to wherever Western culture burns brightest. This series occurs in America, showing Riordan believes the USA to be the inheritor of Western culture. While other scholars have looked at Riordan's texts through the lens of disability (Hawkins), cultural studies (Glasner), or their use in education (Ford), little attention has been paid to depictions of gender in the series. At first glance, the five-book series can be lauded for the inclusion of female characters throughout and for portraying several three-dimensional female demi-god characters. However, a closer reading of the text reveals that girls and women, both divine and mortal, fall into one of Hourihan's strongest binaries surrounding women—being reduced to only good mothers or bad mothers. Even if their mothering is purely metaphorical and not literal, female characters within this text are all judged via this metric: None of their other accomplishments or abilities seem to matter as much as their socially-prescribed duty to mother.

In short, this series follows the adventures, and misadventures, of the hero, Percy

Jackson, as he relives updated versions of quests from ancient Greek myths: from entering

the underworld to save a loved one, to retrieving the Golden Fleece, to navigating the

Labyrinth. Readers follow Percy, his future girlfriend Annabeth, and his best friend, the satyr

Grover, along with a cast of other characters, as they fight for, and at times against, the

Olympians. In the end, the series revolves around Percy fighting against Luke, a fellow

demigod who sells his soul and body to Kronos (evil Titan and father of the Olympians) in

order to get revenge on his godly father who Luke feels abandoned him. Kronos plans to

destroy the gods and bring back an age of chaos with the Titans until Percy's side triumphs,

due in large part to a last-minute change of heart by Luke (*Olympian* 336).

Although Riordan updated ancient Greek myths for the early 21st century, he was not

able to shuck off the sexist trappings of the original myths, specifically the double standard

of parenting that has been passed down within Western culture. Whereas fathers sire

children, and maybe help raise them in extreme situations, it has long been a mother's job to

raise, care for, rear, and support her children despite anything else that may be happening in

the world around her. There are multiple examples of this double standard of care in the

series. The villain's fall from grace revolves around his mother not being able to properly

care for him. Luke, a son of Hermes, runs away from home after his mother has bouts of

insanity from failing to successfully inherit the spirit of the Oracle of Delphi (*Olympian* 239).

Luke feels abandoned by Hermes, but the texts excuse absent godly fathers due to

unspecified "ancient laws" (*Olympian* 358). Percy's mother, on the other hand, is the epitome

of a good mom—endlessly loving and willing to sacrifice anything for her child. This set of

mother-son character foils makes it is clear that the making of a good hero in Riordan's universe starts with motherly care.

Indeed, Percy's mother goes to extreme lengths to protect the narrative's young protagonist, including willingly submitting herself to an abusive relationship in order to hide Percy from monsters (*Thief* 348). She is also literally used as a bartering chip between men when Hades gives Percy the option of saving his friends or his mother, hoping to trap the hero in an impossible choice. Percy knows his self-sacrificing mom would not want to be rescued over anyone else, and therefore leaves her to an eternity of torment in the underworld (*Thief* 316-317). She is eventually saved by Percy, but through no action of her own. Poseidon tells Percy, "Hades sent her [back] when you recovered his helm. Even the Lord of Death pays his debts" (*Thief* 345), reducing Percy's mother to a form of currency between men. She, the "good mom" of this series, is rewarded with a hero son, the boy who saves the world and comes back to her loving embrace at the end.

Dorina K. Lazo Gilmore, in her article "Minority Mama: Rejecting the Mainstream Mothering Model" writes that, in traditional narratives, "the 'good mother'…is dependent on her child for her identity" (104). Readers do not see Percy's mom's life outside of him, and that life does not matter because we see her as mother, but nothing else. Conversely, the "bad mom" of the series is punished through her son dying after he nearly destroys the world. Readers never get to see what becomes of Luke's mother after the final battle is over, yet we know her son, who she waits for every day to return, is dead and will never come back (*Olympian* 96). Mary Jeanette Moran, in her article "Maternal Care Ethics and Children's Fantasy," writes about the ways mothers (noun) and mothering (verb) are valued differently from each other within contemporary Western culture. She points out that "mothering gets

little recognition, and systematic injustices that hinder good mothering go unaddressed" (186). While the idea of "mother" is held to a high regard, the actual labor of mothering and the people who do it are not valued. Readers can see how Luke's mother is held to the standard of the ideal with no regard to her inability to actually do the labor. Her inability to care for Luke originated in a secret curse from Hades no one knew about until the end of the series (*Olympian* 239), yet she must live her life blamed for creating the boy who nearly destroys the world. The only time readers meet her, they can see her mental instability in the "hundreds of Tupperware boxes with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches inside. The ones on the bottom were green and fuzzy, like they'd been there for a long time" (*Olympian* 93). She is still waiting for her son that ran away at nine, "to be back for lunch" (94) over ten years later. And it is shown she behaved in these erratic ways even when Luke was still with her (95). Receiving no reprieve for the circumstances of her life, she was expected to succeed at mothering when that simply is not possible.

Nancy Chodorow, in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, writes many societies "are constituted around a structural split, growing out of women's mothering, between the private, domestic world of women and the public, social world of men" (174). She goes on to explain that while society wants everyone to have certain prescribed aspects of motherhood in them at some point, men are to transcend those limitations and grow into more aggressive forms of care, such as conquest or defense. She claims that the root belief in mothers' role in society is based on a recreation of that role between generations, upheld in how both men and women are expected to behave. She writes, "Women's mothering, then, produces psychological self-definition and capacitates appropriate to mothering in women, and curtails and inhibits these capacities and this self-

definition in men" (208). Readers can see this obliquely in Riordan's universe where successful mothering is the starting point of success for men, but they are not expected to live out those behaviors themselves. Women and girls, however, are expected to take up that task and hold it as the most important job they could possibly be doing.

I started this chapter focusing on Percy and Luke's mothers because they are both the beginning and end to Chodorow's cycle of reproducing mothers. At first, mothering their sons falls solely on them, and those same responsibilities fall to girls in the *Percy Jackson* series who are expected to mother those same boys after their actual mothers are no longer around. Hermione Syndrome centers on the idea that the women and girls surrounding the hero must give of themselves to the point of exhaustion, or even death, so that the hero will prevail. They cannot be the hero, yet their labor and sacrifice are essential to the success of the male protagonist. Just as mothers, when seen singularly in that light, cannot be the hero of their story, so too are the girls subjected to Hermione Syndrome unable to reach beyond the role of helper. In order to be seen as good women, they must fulfill their prescribed role in Chodorow's cycle, becoming the mothers they are destined to be.

Goddesses and the Virgin/Whore Binary

Riordan's universe is populated with humans, gods, demigods, and other mystical beings. I started this chapter looking at the human mothers, and will soon move to investigating the goddesses, in order to end with a critique of how the demigod girls are treated within the text in regard to the pressures they face to mother. Divinity is but a weak shield against the pressure to mother that the goddesses are exposed to, and their demigod

daughters get no such protection. They feel the full force of Hermione Syndrome, molding them into the support Percy—the white, male hero—needs in order to succeed.

Western society's ideal woman is both a virgin and a mother. This is obviously physically impossible in the traditional sense, yet within the world of *Percy Jackson*, goddesses are able to attempt this patriarchal female "perfection" as they can have children without needing to have sex. Riordan's text departs from the original myths in that some of the virgin goddesses—Athena, Demeter, Hecate—do indeed have children, but not conceived through sex (*Labyrinth* 197). Other virginal goddesses—Artemis and Hestia—do not have any children. There is a clear textual divide between which goddesses the narrative, as focalized through Percy, approves of and those it does not. Once again, as with Paolini's hero (see Chapter 1), the morality of the text is decided solely through the perspective of the male hero, with his limited understanding but endless sense of self-righteous entitlement.

I argue that Riordan inadvertently sets up a clear hierarchy of the goddesses with who readers should like, and who they should hate, all surrounding the Virgin/Whore complex—in relation to their ability to mother. Margery Hourihan, in her work on deconstructing cultural binaries, points out that women always end up on the lesser side of cultural binaries, even as they are expected to embody all that is good and wholesome in the form of the mother (Hourihan 68, 166). This is the faulty logic of patriarchy: to expect perfection out of people labeled as inherently imperfect. Moran writes that even when the cultural idea of "mother" garners respect and wields power in certain situations, especially those where it conforms to patriarchy, the actual action of "*mothering* receives a lower level of respect" (186, emphasis in original). There is an inherent double standard applied to mothers: their work is indispensable but not of value. Hermione Syndrome works on a similar principle:

Even as it is the effort and labor of the female sidekick that often gives the hero the opportunity to succeed, she is rarely rewarded in her own right, for is it not reward enough to see her friend/boyfriend/son succeed? Her reward, it seems, is that she takes her "rightful" place in Chodorow's cycle of mothering, not to break out of it in any way.

At first glance, motherhood would seem to be important and honored; however, the series falls into the same trap Chodorow and others bring up: Mothers deserve honor, but not because of who they are, but because of who they create. It is not they, but their offspring, that creates value. To illustrate, there is a clear textual push to have readers dislike Hera, Queen of Olympus and goddess of marriage and family, more than any other goddess. She makes her first meaningful appearance in the fourth book, and after she reveals she does not mind if children die to keep the image of her family wholesome, both Percy and Annabeth reject her philosophy on family and morality. Percy tells Hera, "You only care about your *perfect* family, not real people" and Annabeth agrees, saying, "*You're* the one who doesn't belong, Queen Hera" (*Labyrinth* 350, emphasis in original). Being the goddess of family and marriage does not imbue Hera with reverence within these texts. In actuality, since almost all the demi-god protagonists in the series are bastard children of her family, which she sees as a stain on their reputation, she is positioned as oppositional to the hero and as a threat to children and young adults. Even as she wields incredible power, her mothering style is toxic and heavy handed, showing a type of maternal care the text does not approve of.

Significantly, Aphrodite and Demeter, goddesses of the traditionally feminine characteristics of love and fertility, are shown to be nearly useless throughout the series and therefore weak. Aphrodite, goddess of love, only harasses heroes with romance and showcases her own vanity. In the middle of a quest, she arrives, and as Percy narrates, "She

handed me a polished mirror the size of a dinner plate and had me hold it up for her" (*Curse* 184). She is an annoying obstacle to circumvent as she berates their quest and pesters Percy with questions about his crush. Further, when it comes time to save Olympus, she is not even mentioned within the text until the battle is over. While one of her daughters is an important player within the text, the daughter is found out to be a spy for the enemy because she had a crush on the handsome villain, Luke (*Olympian* 297). Demeter, goddess of agriculture, fertility, and motherhood does not have a speaking role until the last novel, where she is shown to be a nag, chastising her daughter for marrying Hades: "You could've married the god of doctors or the god of lawyers, but *noooo.* You had to eat the pomegranate" (*Olympian* 122). While she does have one battle encounter were readers see her turning giants into grain, she is quickly subdued by an army of monsters (*Olympian* 318). It seems these texts are not geared to promote motherhood on what many may think of its surface attributes—love, marriage, or providing sustenance—as all the goddesses that personify these attributes are either strong and oppositional to the hero or weak and useless. Even as these attributes are a mainstay of what society sees as the role of mothers, the actual labor, as Moran notes, is not truly valued and seen as worthy of praise, only worthy of critique (186).

A more neutral and nuanced goddess within the text is Athena, goddess of wisdom. While not labeled as useless or vindictively hostile to the hero of the story as the previous goddesses were, she is seen as cold, calculating, and devoid of warmth. She votes to kill Percy instead of letting him reach an age where he could be threat to Olympus (*Curse* 294), and she continually tries to stop the romantic relationship that is growing between her daughter, Annabeth, and the hero (*Curse* 298). We also learn she is quick to judge and not above cursing her own children when they displease her (*Labyrinth* 174). Percy notes, "what

a terrible enemy Athena would make, ten times worse than Ares or Dionysus or maybe even

my father" (*Curse* 299). I suggest Athena is the antithesis of Percy's own mother, whose

life's purpose is only to care for and protect her child. Therefore, Athena is not represented as

a positive example of motherhood. Her own desire and ambition take up too much of her life.

In their introduction to *Mothers in Children's and Young Adult Literature,* Lisa Rowe

Fraustino and Karen Coats explain that traditional mothers have "many roles and bear many

burdens: a place from which to launch and a home to return to; a secure envelope that

protects or one that hides and stifles; a voice that guides and chastises; a surface on which to

project the quest for self-understanding" (3). Athena does conform to this idea of the

traditional mother. She does not act as a passive, perpetually encouraging force for her

children. Instead, she brings them into the world, then leaves them to grow and mature with

their mortal fathers who cannot possibly understand the life of a demi-god. Athena's energy

and efficacy centers on her own life and not on her children's, therefore, even as she is not

portrayed as an evil goddess, she is not good either.

In order to be seen as good, a goddess must give herself fully to her children. One

such goddess in the series is Artemis, who the texts clearly want readers to approve of. She

consistently advocates for the demi-gods and shows herself to be brave, honorable, and

capable of admitting when she is wrong. She appears as twelve-year-old girl, leading a

hunting party of other young women whom she has made immortal (*Curse* 29). We learn she

has no children besides her hunters, all of whom have other mortal or divine parents. She is

the epitome of a heterosexual virgin, never even considering sex, and forcing herself and all

of her followers to swear to "turn my back on the company of men" (*Curse* 42). Even as she

offends Percy with this stance, her honor and willingness to sacrifice herself to save others

make him, and readers through him, respect the goddess. She, more than any other Olympian throughout the whole series, is seen as a helper to the heroes.

       Significantly, even though she is a virgin, Artemis is good at mothering. She cares for all of her hunters and acts as their protector in the world. She is their self-sacrificing mother, even as she remains an eternal virgin. In the third book, where Annabeth is kidnapped and made to hold the sky in place of the Titan Atlas, it is Artemis who chooses to take that burden from her even though Annabeth is not her daughter, but saying she has "the spirit of a true huntress" (*Curse* 268). Artemis gives up her own power and freedom, and she is the first goddess readers get to see in a singularly positive light. This willing relinquishment of power reflects reoccurring attitudes historically surrounding Artemis that Susan G. Cole speaks about in her chapter "Domesticating Artemis." Whereas originally Artemis "could be explained in her most savage form only as a foreign goddess, imported from a distant and alien land" (201), she eventually became a protector of virginity "proceeding [girls] service of Aphrodite" (210). It seems that Artemis protects whatever a society deems most valuable about girls, and in both Riordan's and the Ancient Greek's case, virginity seems to rank extremely high on that list. For it is not what the girls do on Artemis' hunt that gets the most attention within Riordan's text—it is the fact that they must forever swear off men which comes up repeatedly. Shari Thurer, in her book *The Myths of Motherhood,* says, "Sex and motherhood have not mixed well since the demise of the goddess religions, when men began to split woman into madonnas or whores in every sphere" (xx), and even in this universe, which brings back some female divinity, it does nothing to undermine the Western system of categorization that effects all women, regardless of age or sexual maturity.

The titular last Olympian of the final book, Hestia, garners approval when she acts as the virginal mother to all within Western culture. Twice within the final book readers are told that she is the final line of defense for Western culture (*Olympian* 103, 306) and "the most important" god (308). She also gives Percy some unconventional advice for a hero narrative, advice on when to yield. She illuminates her point with the story of how she gave up her seat on the Olympian Council in order to allow Dionysus a place. Percy notes that this choice unbalanced the council so it is now dominated by men instead of being equal along gender lines, to which she replies, "It was the best solution, not a perfect one" (*Olympian* 102). The message repeated throughout the series is that women sacrificing their power for the greater good of society is worthwhile. This expectation of sacrifice also falls on the girls who Percy surrounds himself with and is a significant aspect of Hermione Syndrome.

Hourihan writes specifically of the Olympian Goddesses when she notes they "are consistently shown as aiding and supporting the heroes because they approve of their character and their enterprises" (169). Traditional goddesses are often seen as forces of good as they are passive actors themselves but give support and boons to heroes. Many of the goddesses Riordan writes in a negative light do not follow that pattern, as they often vocally disapprove of the hero. Hestia, a goddess readers are meant to approve of, enacts this aspect of traditional femininity perfectly by acting only through Percy and not of her own volition. However, none of the male gods are ever asked to make sacrifices like Hestia's, a pattern readers also see played out within the demigods of the story. These girls are expected to fight and serve at the bequest of the male hero, but not to outshine him, nor steal his glory. And while Riordan has populated the text with many female demigods, how they are allowed to operate within the story is drastically different than the male heroes.

Space for Girls in the Hero Narrative

  While there are hundreds of demi-gods within the series, unless they leave on a quest, relatively little is known about them. Percy is the main hero of this tale, but he rarely ever adventures alone. Armed with a handful of companions, usually Grover and Annabeth, he strikes out to complete whatever quest he must. His other companions through the texts are often girls, including Thalia (Daughter of Zeus), Bianca (Daughter of Hades), Zoe (Daughter of Atlas), and Clarisse (Daughter of Ares). Most of these girls do not last long in the plot however, with Bianca and Zoe both dying in the first book they are part of, and Thalia joining Artemis' hunters and exiting the main plot in her first meaningful book. It is interesting to note all three of these young women enter the text when Percy no longer has access to Annabeth due to a kidnapping and, once he has her back, none of the other women seem to be needed. Hourihan talks at length about the ways women are allowed into hero narratives, and shows that they are often purposefully excluded (29, 97, 157). I argue that, even as more and more women gain access to these narratives, holdovers from the heroic tradition limit the number of women allowed into the stories. It seems there is room for a Hermione, but only for one Hermione. When these characters have nothing else to give to the hero, or are a threat to his role as the "chosen one," their usefulness evaporates and they are, once again, denied entrance to the narrative altogether.

  Annabeth is the main girl within the series and seems to operate, in large part, as Percy's caregiver throughout. He first meets her, thinking she is "a pretty girl, her blonde hair curled like a princess's," as she nurses him back to health after a monster attack (*Thief* 56-57). While it seems like they are pretty equal when it comes to being adventurous demigods, that leveling in ability should be concerning. Annabeth has been training for four years when

Percy first arrives, yet they are instantly equally matched in skill and power. This may come from the fact that Percy is the son of one of the three most powerful gods, but I do not read that as a passable explanation, just as another metaphor for inherited power within the patriarchy. In addition, while it does take until the very end of the series for them to become romantic partners, it is clear that Annabeth's status as Percy's eventual girlfriend gives her a protection not offered to others. For example, even when she is kidnapped and forced to hold up the sky in Atlas' place (*Curse* 72), she survives that encounter when holding it for just a few moments nearly kills Percy. Percy often rescues her with ease, and she rescues him several times as well, but almost always at the cost of an injury, except when she stabs monsters in the back (*Monsters* 22, *Labyrinth* 287). Annabeth even takes a poisoned dagger for Percy (*Olympian* 190) because she "had this feeling you were in danger" (199). No other girl within these texts takes as much of a beating as Annabeth does, yet she always survives, ready to sacrifice herself again and again for the hero, just as his mother sacrifices her own life and happiness for him.

Hourihan notes one of the main avenues women can enter the hero narrative through, other than as a mother, is by being the hero's bride (193). Taking Chodorow's work into consideration, one can see the bride and the mother architypes as being the same person, but at different points of their lives. In Western culture, and specifically its hero narrative, both these roles exist to support, but never outshine, the hero. And once the bride loses her youth, she evolves into the mother of the hero's children, fulfilling her role in Chodorow's cycle of reproduction. Hourihan notes how the role of Bride works in hero stories, writing, "To begin with the bride is white, and usually blonde" (193), as Annabeth is. There is no fault inherently in being white or blonde, but these details are part of a larger pattern. Although

Riordan did try to push back against the stereotypes surround the Bride with Annabeth—she never chooses to be inactive, a prize to be won, or subordinate of the hero (Hourihan 191-199) —structurally, the story places her in all these positions. In *The Titan's Curse* she is inactive for most of the story as a prisoner of Atlas. Readers do not get to see her side of the story and no mention of attempted escape, subterfuge, or even strategy is shown. Hourihan writes, "In some stories the hero's reward is not a golden object, but a golden bride" (51). Throughout the whole series, it is obvious a romantic plot is being built between Percy and Annabeth, and I argue that Percy's reward for saving the world is really in his relationship with Annabeth. Only when the world is safe can they be together. Finally, and most concernedly, while Annabeth does not always subordinate herself to Percy, she always puts his needs above her own. And on the rare occasion she does prioritize herself, keeping a personal secret from Percy, calamity follows that could have been avoided if she would have been even more selfless (*Labyrinth* 185, 348).

While Annabeth seems to be an attempt to undermine the stereotypes of the Bride, Clarisse, daughter of Ares, offers another interesting perspective on how a woman's willingness to sacrifice is the price she must pay in order to be seen positively within the story. Clarisse is the school-yard bully caricature within the text—seemingly big, mean, and scary, but really misunderstood and definitely someone you want on your side in a fight. In the first book she acts as an antagonist, but in the second, when she goes on a quest that Percy and Annabeth hijack, readers get to see her vulnerable side. It is only when she gives up her right to be the sole hero of her quest that she begins to take on a more heroic role (*Monsters* 234). She is a villain until she succumbs to Hermione Syndrome. She is absent from any meaningful participation in the next book and acts as more of a nurse to her crush

in *The Battle of the Labyrinth* than the warrior she is (230). It is this act of domestic kindness and mothering, I argue, that firmly places her in a protagonist role. She is not allowed to simply be a great warrior, she must also display a side that is domestic and romantic before gaining acceptance as a good character. Chodorow says, "Girls are taught to be mothers, trained for nurturance, and told they out to be mothers" (31) and we can see this with all the demi-god girls who end up being seen positively. If they want to be seen as good, they need to first prove that they can fill their baseline prescribed duty—mothering.

When Girls Fight, the Hero Wins

As long as women take part in Chodorow's reproduction of mothering, by choice or societal pressure, without breaking from the cycle and demanding more for themselves, and from men, they exist at the edges of the hero narrative and never in the center. They occupy space around the hero, vying for the right to exist in the story, a right which, in the traditional narrative, only manifests from their relationship to the hero. Another facet of Hermione Syndrome, then, is the unhealthy and gender-specific form of competition among girls surrounding the hero we see repeated in YA fantasy, competition for the hero's attention which gives them the right to exist in the story. In Paolini's work (see Chapter 1), readers can see Saphira's jealousy and dislike for any romantic partner of Eragon as a flaw, and as Ashley Jones pointed out about Hermione, the lack of sisterhood in Rowling's texts is problematic (107). Jones writes, "the relationship between Hermione and the other girls is never one of sisterhood, but instead an environment that fosters girl hate" (38). Where there could conceivably be cooperation and bonding, girl sidekicks often fight any other girl that

comes close to the hero, a pattern that then works to justify the limited space the hero narrative has for women.

In Riordan's work, two girls compete for Percy's affection, Annabeth and Rachel Dare. In a disturbingly oedipal twist, Rachel has the same ability as Percy's mother to see into the realm of the gods that is usually obscured to mortals, and this connection seems to spark a romantic interest in Percy (*Curse* 213, *Labyrinth* 320). Annabeth does not appreciate this romantic competition and is cruel to Rachel in ways she is not to any other ally in the series. When they first meet and Annabeth realizes Percy has other friends who are girls, Annabeth's "smile melted. She stared at Rachel" (*Labyrinth* 15). These two girls also have several fights over superficial things that builds tension in their relationship. So, even as they are both young women with extraordinary powers, they use much of that power to tear each other down for the attention of the hero. Hermione Syndrome, it seems, absorbs their energy this way so they cannot outshine the hero in his own story.

Chodorow notes, "One way women fulfill [their need for love] is through the creation and maintenance of important personal relations with other women" (200). However, in Riordan's narrative, except for Artemis and her band of virginal huntresses, there do not seem to be many strong relationships between or among women. Even Artemis' relationship with her hunters seem more predicated on dismissing men than celebrating women. While Clarisse and Silena, the spy daughter of Aphrodite, do have a close friendship, Silena dies at the close of the series—leaving no heroes in close female friendships. It would seem that when girls and women are written under Hermione Syndrome, they cannot both support the hero and his quest and hold close relations with other women. All their energy must be given to his victory, or squandered fighting each other, otherwise they are punished, in many cases

with death. I offer that the patriarchy has formed the hero narrative to appear as though it is the strength of the singular hero that creates victory. And even as authors attempt to challenge and undermine this idea by showing the contributions women make, it is at the cost of any cooperative feminine power. For example, Riordan shows repeatedly the ways women have empowered Percy, but they do so in ways that give him power and leave them with less, as we see in Annabeth and Rachel's fighting. While Percy ascends to the level of other mythic heroes, and is even offered godhood (*Olympian* 351), girls cannot even seem to be friendly with each other as they vie for the limited space surrounding the hero.

Both Rachel's entrance and exit from the narrative are significant in exploring the ways girl-helpers are allowed to exist within the story. Much like how when Annabeth was removed from Percy's friendship triangle in *The Titan's Curse,* in *The Battle of the Labyrinth,* Grover is removed from the plot, leaving a space in the trio open. Eventually, Rachel fills this role, but with two girls in the triangle, the aforementioned competition takes root. Once again, it is only when space allows can a powerful woman enter the story, and when the "rightful" owner of that point of the trio comes back, she is removed from significance. The only way resolution comes between Rachel and Annabeth is when Rachel becomes off-limits romantically. In the beginning of the final book, readers can see Percy torn over who he is more attracted to repeatedly (*Olympia*n 5, 46, 70), but when Rachel eventually becomes Apollo's new Oracle of Delphi (368), she can no longer date. Annabeth perfectly embodies Hermione Syndrome as she gloats about her being romantically chosen in the same breath as saving the world in an exchange with Percy:

"You saved the world" [Annabeth] said

"We saved the world"

"And Rachel is the new Oracle, which means she won't be dating anybody"

"You don't sound disappointed," [Percy] noticed

Annabeth shrugged, "Oh, I don't care."

"Uh-huh."

She raised an eyebrow. "You got something to say to me, Seaweed Brain?"

"You'd probably kick my butt."

"You *know* I'd kick your butt." (*Olympian* 372-373, emphasis in original)

In their relationship with each other, both Annabeth and Rachel are reduced to either "the girl who gets Percy" or "the girl who does not." Where there could have been a chance at genuine sisterhood, instead the relationship is antagonistic. In the end, it is the girl who can carry out the duties to mother him while he grows away from his actual mother that gets to be his Bride. Chodorow claims, "The early experience of being cared for by a woman produces a fundamental structure of expectations in women and men concerning mothers' lack of separate interests from their infants and total concern for their infants' welfare" (208). If a narrative does not fight back against this structure, then the "natural" best choice of future mother is the girl who takes best care of the hero. And while Rachel has the eerily oedipal connection to his mom, it is Annabeth that endangers her life and sacrifices her goals for his quest. In a world of "chosen ones," that all-or-nothing sacrifice seems to be the truest way any woman can love the hero.

Conclusion

While Riordan's series works hard to pull these myths into the present in a way that empowers women, what it ends up doing is creating a clear list of criteria for "good women"

and "bad women" by how it portrays humans, goddesses, and demigods. Being a virgin seems to be a prerequisite to acceptability among the goddesses and, the more virginal they are, the more the texts positions them in likable ways. Next, being a good nurturing mother seems to be a requirement for all women who wish to be seen positively. It is the goddesses who can be both virgins and mothers that the texts positions as best, with Artemis and Hestia being the most helpful and honest gods to the heroes. The demi-gods are all seen as virgins, as they are children, and none of them have children. Despite this, the girls are expected to take on motherly roles. Nursing men back to health appears to be a mainstay of good women, and it even acts a conduit for formerly bad women to become good. Also, putting aside their own needs for the hero's plan to work separates the good from the bad, and might even be the determining factor on who gets to be the Bride at the end of the story.

A final aspect of these texts is that, in placing women in the action, it adds yet another thing they must excel at in order to be "good women." They cannot just be virgin mothers who nurture those around them, they must also be apt fighters. Artemis fulfills this by being goddess of the hunt, Hestia burns Kronos and stops him from getting his sword during a pivotal battle (*Olympian* 335), and both Annabeth and Clarisse are apt warriors throughout the texts. Even Percy's mother grabs a shotgun and fights against monsters she has no chance of defeating in the final battle (*Olympian* 319). Demigods who are both virgins and good at mothering, but fail to be great fighters, such as Selina, play the role of traitor and spy, falling distinctly into the "bad woman" category. Even Rachel, with no training, takes out a few monsters when needed.

Hourihan writes that the binaries within hero narratives work to justify injustices within our culture. She says, "The effect of dualistic thinking is to naturalize domination, for

it becomes part of the identities of both the dominant and subordinate groups" (17). Most girls who are written under Hermione Syndrome are first seen as feminist characters, pushing back against patriarchal practices. However, since they still fall into Hourihan's binary system, they are actually upholding the larger patriarchal system, living within it, and only moving towards the edges of acceptability. And that is noble! But it cannot be the end goal. While these characters deserve praise for how they resist the system, they have not transcended it. Therefore, blindly lauding them as feminist icons stagnates the movement instead of pushing it forward. I argue that Hourihan's idea of domination being naturalized applies to these characters because, even with all their flaws, they are held up as an example and goal for girls to aspire towards. If they are the end goal, the patriarchy might be nudged, but not truly challenged.

In order to push back on the patriarchy, stories must work to challenge Hourihan's binaries. Riordan inherited, within the source material of the ancient myths, many of the sexist binaries that have been passed down within Western culture. And while it is clear he attempted to dismantle some of the more brazenly sexist roles prescribed to women, it seems some of the deeper, more culturally ingrained binaries were not challenged within this text. However, in a later series in which many of these characters reappear, Riordan made structural and narrative changes that work to further challenge binaries surrounding women. In *The Heroes of Olympus* series, Riordan keeps the first person narration but focalizes through several different characters, including several women. Readers get to see the world through Annabeth's perspective at times, and her character becomes far more three-dimensional as she develops both intellectually and personally. She and Rachel even mend their relationship and become good friends and mutually supportive of each other. So too do

the goddesses become more complicated and multifaceted, giving more reasonable, nuanced explanations for their actions. Their power is framed as feminine but also positive, pushing back on the patriarchal idea that only masculine power is meaningful. Just as Riordan has grown, adapted, and moved towards a more complicated, nuanced, and purposeful writing of women within fantasy, so too should other writers closely examine where and how they place women within their texts, and work to disrupt binary thinking. Only when society can see past the arbitrary ways people, and the world, are organized can we start the work of breaking out of Chodorow's cycle, dismantling the patriarchal hero narrative, and encouraging girls to hold power in their own right.

Chapter 3: Sometimes We Succeed and Sometimes We Sabotage Our Best Intentions:

The Backwards Power of Closure in Chris D'Lacey's *The Last Dragon Chronicles*

When I was a child, I read fantasy voraciously. Anything I could get my hands on, from *Redwall*, to *Wicked*, to *Ranger's Apprentice.* But what started my love of fantasy was C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*. My mother read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* to me*,* and when I found out there were six other books packed with magic and adventure, it set into motion my drive to read. A stickler for order, I decided to read them chronologically, starting with *The Magician's Nephew* and ending with *The Last Battle.* Truly, they were some of the only fantasy books I was allowed to read (I snuck most of the rest). I was raised in a far-right, evangelical, homeschooled community and no time was lost connecting the direct biblical imagery and plots from the *Narnia* books to my life. Therefore, as Aslan died, I knew it was really Jesus dying for me; as Aslan strips the scales from Eustace, I knew that was the pain of our sin being pulled out of us; and as the world of Narnia falls in *The Last Battle,* I knew that Aslan guarding the door to the next world, a paradise, was truly Jesus culling the sheep from the goats and damning those not admitted to hell.

The ending of the series did not sit well with me, for I also knew I would have been on the outside of that door, left to the damnation of giants and dragons and darkness. I was still very deeply in the closet at this point and fully knew my sexuality, according to my upbringing, would separate me from God and an eternity in Heaven. This fantastical series, which had been a wonderful escape for me to live a life of color, magic, and sensitivity without the crushing weight of toxic masculinity and heteronormativity that permeated my

real life, was ripped away from me in that moment of closure. Narnia was no longer a place for me to live, but a place to be damned.

Margery Hourihan's *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature* examines cultural binaries built into narratives that reinforce the power structures of the culture in which they are written. While she does not directly name the binary of Redeemed/Dammed, it is one that can be seen all throughout Western narratives. Specifically, in predominantly Christian societies in Europe, the USA, and Australia, this underlying binary influences countless narratives. It can be seen plainly in the *Narnia* series, or in the works of Christian writers such as Mary Martha Sherwood's *The History of the Fairchild Family*, or Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time.* It also appears in epic stories in which right and wrong are clearly defined and the role of villain and hero have little to no ambiguity—*Star Wars, Harry Potter, The Inheritance Cycle.* Each of these narratives have a clear point where everyone must choose to do what is right or accept their role of villain. Relying on the Redeemed/Damned binary to sort good and bad people is an easy way for the narrative to function efficiently. However, for readers such as myself who were left on the Damned side, the final sorting between damned and redeemed becomes not a place of easy narrative closure, but of backwards rupture. For, up to that point, I had been able to see myself as the hero, as one of the children who Aslan would have loved. But when the final cull happens and the creature of Narnia come to Aslan,

> …one or other of two things happened to each of them. They all looked
> straight as his face, I don't think they had any choice about that. And when
> some looked , the expression was of their faces changed terribly—it was fear
> and hatred…And all the creatures that looked at Aslan in that way swerved to

the right, his left, and disappeared into his huge black shadow…away to the

left of the doorway. (Lewis 512-513)

No one needed to tell me at 11 that being gay was not acceptable to right-wing, evangelical

Christianity. And therefore, no one needed to tell me that when Aslan, Jesus, looked at me

and saw me for all I was, I would not have been let through the door. The power of that

closure not only removed me from the end of the series, but retroactively removed my ability

to imagine myself as the hero in the previous stories too.

Hourihan argues that the forms in which we write are not only influenced by the

world in which they are written but also create the world we are moving toward (235).

Likewise, the endings of books not only solidify the message of their narrative but also push

for the normalization of that ending in the future. Many theorists study the idea of closure.

Both Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth*

Century Women Writers and Roberta Seelinger Trites' *Disturbing the Universe: Power and*

Repression in Young Adult Literature make the argument that a narrative's closure is its most

powerful statement. DuPlessis claims that works which push past a traditional, expected

ending are, of their nature, radical (x). The hero narrative, which most YA fantasy novels

follow, is one narrative form known for both adhering to tradition and for radical departures

from it. This thesis has so far investigated characters within that structure and how they

function. In this chapter, I will look more at the narrative structure of closure and what

impact it can make on a series that would seemingly otherwise thwart Hermione Syndrome. I

began with my personal anecdote to illustrate the power of closure and to show the idea of a

backwards rupture, but will now move past the *Narnia* example into the third series of books

I examine—Chris D'Lacy's *The Last Dragon Chronicles* (*LDC*).

The Fire Within (2001) started D'Lacey's series and is quite the cute children's book. It focusses on a young college student, David, discovering that the small clay dragons his landlady makes are real, and learning that his disbelief may make a dragon that was made for him cry and lose its magical spark. The final, seventh book, *The Fire Ascending* (2013), deals with an interdimensional, time-warped battle between bodyless thought-beings, polar bears, dragons, sybils, and humans. Like many fantasy series for children, the books aged with their readership. The first books are clearly children's books and the later books are young adult novels. And, like many fantasy series, the plot and lore are far too complex to be summarized effectively in a single piece of writing. The series became a best seller in both the UK and USA for the first three books, but as the series matured, both critical reviews and popularity dwindled.

Each book in *LDC* is full of three-dimensional female characters who have full lives, stories, and motivations outside of David, the main hero. David even dies for a while, leaving all the action to the women who are left behind after his physical death. The lore of the universe centers on a matrilineal line of mothers and daughters who carry the magic of the world's last dragon within them and reproduce through magic instead of sex. Liz Pennykettle is the matriarch of the series, the magical potter who can bring miniature clay dragons to life. She is the mother of Lucy, a spunky girl readers get to watch grow up into a formidable young woman. Zanna, a goth-girl turned actual sybil acts as the romantic partner to the hero. However, she outshines him at almost every turn, and holds a far stronger moral compass throughout the narrative. Their daughter, Alexa, becomes an angel and a key player in stopping the destruction of the world. Even the main villain, Gwilanna, has complex motivations, several redemption arcs, and a full life outside of her villainy. All these women

embody far more than any of Hourihan's binaries allow for in traditional narratives. Each character has defining moments where they transcend the systems of power that work to oppress them. However, even while *LDC* radically challenges the binaries to which Hourihan calls our attention, and undermines embedded power structures, the closure of the series—which costs the matriarch her life, reaffirms a male savior, and removes from power the women who had moved the universe—creates a narrative in which the change it hoped to espouse is sabotaged.

"Sometimes"—Complicating Binaries through Intersectionality

An easy trap to fall into when critiquing the negative use of narrative binaries in fiction is to make a new set of rules or another binary to categorize "good" and "bad" writing patterns. Much like I hope YA fantasy writers will transcend the binaries binding our world, so too do I hope that my own writing does not simply label things as purely good/bad, positive/negative. Therefore, I want to take the space to show how even the Hermione Syndrome patients I examine in this work have truly positive aspects and impact. I also wish to give credit where it is due to authors who are pushing forward toward a world better than the one they inherited.

DuPlessis, in thinking of the ways that male written narratives influence women readers, writes that "women are trained to a personality, formed by social constraints that compel an undivided commitment to one path; allusions to the psychological economy of romance makes change seem impossible" (90). However, D'Lacey's work, largely, does not fall into this pattern. He breaks out of those narrative confines and makes the "impossible" the reality of his work. The women of *LDC* rarely prioritize romance and never at the cost of

their mission to protect the legacy of dragons. A major component of one book's plot

revolves around Liz being tricked into losing the man she loves because she thinks it will

cost losing her magical ways (*Fire Star*). Further, Zanna is far too complicated and powerful

to ever be thought of as just David's girlfriend, and in an inverse of expected patriarchy,

David is even named "her boyfriend" in writing about the books (Wikipedia).

     A major theme in the series is "comingling" where two—or more—separate entities

become one and share in experience, body, and thought. The ultimate goal of many players in

the story is to comingle with a dragon and gain enlightenment (*The Fire Ascending* 353).

Many characters wish to unify their identity with a dragon or other being, fully sharing in

experiences and having an equal, symbiotic exchange of power. They "comingle" and

become one. This can be seen positively if the relationship truly is mutually beneficial, but it

can also work to flatten experiences and give domination to one partner. Robyn Thomas and

Annette Davies, in "What Have the Feminists Done for Us? Feminist Theory and

Organizational Resistance," investigate the ideas of resistance and identity. They argue

against homogenizing women as a single group, saying, "rather than talking of a unified

women's standpoint, there needs to be a recognition of different standpoints and for a much

more contextually grounded knowledge" and "post-structuralist feminism emphasizes the

importance of recognizing multiple voices…women have 'fractured identities', united around

their marginality" (717). Therefore, while all women could be united under one identity,

doing so would eliminate important, and powerful differences within womanhood. D'Lacey's

work does not strip women of their individuality. Instead, it sets up complex ways that

women interact with their world, both as the women they are and also every other

intersecting identity they hold.

The oppressive layering and unification of identities is comparable to the ideas of Hourihan and DuPlessis when they investigate how the hero narrative influences culture, and culture influences all narratives, in a cyclical fashion. Hourihan writes, "Though infinitely varied in detail the hero story is always the same" (9) and DuPlessis says, "Narrative in the most general terms is a version of, or a special expression of, ideology: representations by which we construct and accept values and institutions" (x). If the hero narrative being told repeatedly is the same, and such narratives are an expression of ideology, which in turn informs how society constructs itself, then it is no surprise that the heroes of narratives are always the men who already hold power in the outside world. In the terminology of *LDC*, narrative and societal ideology are comingled to the point where they cannot be easily separated, and they operate as one entity. Hermione Syndrome, then, is one small aspect of the comingled whole, but as one piece of the whole starts to come undone, an entire system can falter. Creating uncertainty among cultural norms, such as the "correct" side of Hourihan's binaries, or questioning if such binaries are needed, is one step towards deconstructing the oppressive links between narrative and ideology. *LDC's* main theme, I argue, is the fluidity of reality, and D'Lacey uses it to pull apart Hourihan's embedded structures.

The idea of "sometimes" is a central point throughout the series. David's magical clay dragon, Gadzooks, uses the power of that word to rip apart space-time and throw characters into an alternate reality where they can escape an incoming attack (*Dark Fire* 567). In that alternate reality they find the "Is" at the top of a mythical library/ark that holds the possibilities of every choice in every dimension (*Fire World* 373). From the Is, history, present, future, power, and control all fall away, and only what exists, which is everything in

every combination, matters. But only "sometimes." The Is is both a place of limitlessness and

uselessness—disrupting the very way we think about reality, choice, and power. In this space

and understanding of reality, the binaries Hourihan identifies hold no value—or at least only

hold it "sometimes." In *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, bell hooks writes

about the inherent layering of identities within all people and how the feminist movement

should not narrow its vision of feminism to just one type of woman. She states, "To be truly

visionary we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously

imagining possibilities beyond that reality" (110). And that, I argue, is the beginning of a

chip in the ideological armor of the hero narrative. Knowing where we stand, while

continually questioning the given supremacy of any set of identities, and even questioning

the system which give them power, is in itself a form of rebellion. When those systems can

be seen as a "sometimes" instead of an "always," it strips away some of the power the hero

narrative has imbued those identities with for centuries. We can see these rips, these

"sometimes," all throughout *LDC*.

One character, Alexa, is shown to be a time-traveling, gender-bending entity who is

"sometimes" a girl, "sometimes" a boy, and "sometimes" a genderless angel (*The Fire*

Ascending 261). In an email exchange with Chris D'Lacey, I asked if Alexa, who is

introduced long before her boy-form Agwain, was meant to be written as a transgender

character. He said no, instead, "I was messing with time and reality shifts (a bit of Dr Who

regeneration in there, perhaps)" (D'Lacey). Even if he did not intend to, a queer reading is

very easily made. Intentionally, though, it does seem he disrupted the binary of gender,

complicating where power resides within, and outside of, that binary.

So too is Zanna, the romantic interest of the main hero, removed from Hourihan's role of the Bride. In appearance alone, Zanna rebuffs the stereotype of the blonde damsel-in-distress trope, or the prize to be won (Hourihan 193). Readers first learn of her as David recalls who she is: "She was a Goth. She had a face as white as a hard-boiled egg and she dressed from head to toe in black…and, what freaked David the most, her black pneumatic lips…She was one scary licorice stick" (*Ice Fire* 52). Further, unlike Annabeth from the *Percy Jackson* series (see Chapter 2), Zanna's worth is not determined by the care she gives to the male hero. She, in her own right, holds power and is an actor in almost every book in which she appears. Even when David is not in the story, her actions hold meaning and move the plot forward. It is also important to note that Zanna's power comes from an act of disobedience, which runs counter to the prescribed role of the Bride in narratives. When visiting David, she goes into Liz's pottery studio, where she is expressly forbidden to go, and magically "quickens" a dragon egg (*Ice Fire* 94). This action activates her own, dormant magical abilities and begins her transformation into a powerful sybil. Hourihan writes that in traditional narratives the "hero story naturalizes the powerlessness of women and their domination by men, and presents this as a desirable state of affairs for women as well as for men" (198). But Zanna upends that naturalization in that she wields power in ways that are not viable to even the hero of the story, and often rebuffs attempts at being controlled.

In the email exchange I had with the author, I asked why he chose to write about a strictly female family overseen by other magical women, to which he responded:

> …I just like strong female characters. I was estranged from my mother for the
> last 18 years of her life. I sometimes think that in writing characters like Liz
> and Zanna I'm looking for the maternal influence that was missing from my

life when I was David's age. I re-read all the books recently and was surprised

by how much Zanna clashes with David. It didn't feel like that when I was

writing them. You can sense the deep undercurrent of love they have for one

another, but you wouldn't want to mess with Zanna. She's my favourite

character. (D'Lacey)

D'Lacey was writing strong women intentionally, and that maternal nurturing was an

important aspect to these characters. However, unlike so many other YA fantasy series which

rely on the shallow, one-dimensional version of motherhood Hourihan describes (161),

D'Lacey's work complicates that binary and makes good, strong mothers who care about

more than just their children. Liz is such a mother, in that she cares about her daughter and

her clay creations, but she is also engaged with the world at large and cares about her own

life too. For example, when she discovers that she was tricked out of marrying the love of her

life by Gwilanna, she immediately rectifies that error because it is what she wants, not what

is necessarily best for her prodigy (*The Fire Eternal* 15). DuPlessis asserts that mothers in

many narratives leave the task of meaning-making and creation to their daughters. She

writes, "The daughter becomes an artist to extend, reveal, and elaborate her mother's often

thwarted talents" (93). This, however, is not the case with Liz, as she is shown to be the most

gifted daughter that her magical line has seen in thousands of years (*Ice Fire* 235). Even as

she holds power, she does not overshadow her daughter, Lucy.

Lucy is as close to a Hermione-shaped character as we see in *LDC*. She starts off as a

young, spunky girl, deeply caring for others and too curious for her own good in the first

book, and grows into a computer savant who can flow between the mortal and magical

worlds in which her family coexists. Much of what people love in Hermione comes through

in Lucy too; Lucy is loud, brash, unapologetically driven, incredibly smart, and, like Hermione, she is adept at crossing borders between magical and mundane worlds. She emulates her mother in that she can harness the magical energy of the universe, "auma," and create dragons that come alive (*Ice Fire* 4). Hourihan writes that in a traditional narrative, "when a relationship between women, especially between mother and daughter, is featured it is almost invariably hostile and destructive" (200). And while there is relational tension between Lucy and her mother at times throughout the series, the deep love they have for each other, and their duty to protect the legacy of dragons pulls them through it. They have a nuanced and believable relationship, one of mutual care, respect, and love.

In her concluding chapter, DuPlessis argues that speculative fiction may hold a key component for women's liberation within narrative forms. She names the power to look beyond conventions as "future vision" and offers that, "To write a narrative that includes future vision is, even crudely, to break the reproduction of the status quo" (197). D'Lacey began writing this series over 20 years ago, and as he said in my email interview with him, "Attitudes and gender politics have certainly changed a great deal since I began to write the series, but I think I'd be happy, still, with the way the characters are drawn" if he wrote it today (D'Lacey). Clearly, D'Lacey attempted to depart from reproducing the status quo with these characters, breaking from traditional power structures, and emphasizing the "sometimes" nature of his universe. However, even as he pushed his universe towards more nuance and moral complexity, the ending of the series creates a backwards rupture which, I argue, re-comingles the narrative with dominate power structures that undoes much of the work he attempted to do.

God's Word from a Dragon's Toe

A major theme running through *LDC* is the power language holds to create and shape reality. David, in the first book, writes a story about a squirrel that comes to life in front of him and Lucy (*The Fire Within* 215). Throughout the series, people, but specially men, are seen using the power of language and writing to shape the universe. Maria Nikolajeva, in her book *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*, argues that young people can find empowerment through characters in literature, but that "empowerment is allowed on certain conditions, and is almost without exceptions limited in time" (204). She also states that "fantasy…is a highly efficient strategy of empowering a child" (17). However, since language itself is a tool for both oppression and liberation, both rooted in patriarchy and the Patriarchal Symbolic Order, the ways in which language is used must be closely examined. While I agree with Nikolajeva that fantasy can, with conditions, empower a child reader, there is diversity in child readers, and many will not be empowered with traditional uses of patriarchal language. People who have been Othered—women, BIPOC, queer folks, etc.—can and do use language in powerful ways to fight against systems of power, but in doing so, we use a system of language that was not created to liberate us but to oppress us. Therefore, whenever language and power are obliquely connected within a work of literature, it deserves close and critical examination.

There is no doubt that words hold power, and it is blatant that the creation of words and ideas are a main source of power within *LDC*. In *Fire World,* alternate versions of the characters exist in an enormous library/ark and can gauge the auma, or power, coming from books. As David explores the library, "he noticed something very unusual. The books had no titles or authors – or words…And yet he could feel more auma in his hand than would be

present in a whole roomful of books farther down in the building" (447). We later learn that these books are the ones that are still to be written. Here the series seems to be arguing that the most powerful books are the ones that have not been written yet and have endless possibilities. That then begs the question of who gets to do the writing? Who gets to wield that power?

It is critical to point out that only the written word seems to have the power of stored auma. It is shown in the library's books, and it is the act of Gadzooks writing "sometimes" which stops the multiverse and allows the action of the final two books to happen in and out of time. And yet, the written word is not the only form of narrative which exists within this series. Liz and Lucy pass down their history in an oral tradition. It is a sacred moment as they recall the legend of the first of their line, Guinevere, telling the story of how she preserved the spirit of the final dragon (*The Fire Within* 172). While that story is lived out in the final books, the telling of the tale is not imbued with the same strength as the written word. Ali Abdi, in his article "Oral Societies and Colonial Experiences: Sub-Saharan Africa and the de facto Power of the Written Word," looks at the way powerful groups impose the dominance of written language over oral traditions. He writes that "in the course of human history, though, and especially with selective marginalization of the colonized populations who have been discursively and analytically deployed as the 'Other'…oral traditions, which mostly characterized these societies, were also relegated to historical non-significance" (42-43). He also claims that oral traditions were thought of as inherently less than written histories and "these education systems and languages were not [seen as] fit for human development" (43). While Liz and Lucy are not colonized people, being white and English in the UK publishing of the books and white Americans in the USA's copies, they are discursively the "other" as a

matriarchal line in a patriarchal world. Their history is passed down orally and is not given

the same power or status that the written word holds within the series. Walter Ong, in his

article "Before Textuality: Orality and Interpretation," pushes against the idea that oral

traditions should not hold the same power of meaning-making as writing. He even concludes

that, in certain ways, orality creates more equal and meaningful communication, arguing,

"Ultimately, meaning is not assigned but negotiated, and out of a holistic situation in the

human life world: the speaker or writer in a given situation, which is shared by speaker and

hearer in oral communication, but in written communication is generally not shared" (267).

Ong would argue, then, that the Pennykettle oral history should hold high esteem and power

within the series. And yet, for some reason, it does not.

Interestingly, not all oral traditions lack power within the series. *LDC* closely links

dragons and polar bears, who are both sentient within the books. The bears also have an oral

tradition, carried generation to generation through their "Teller of Ways" (*The Fire

Ascending* 476). Highly evolved humans who exist as pure thought, the Fain, remove polar

bears from earth into another dimension for a time. One Teller of Ways, Avrel, has an

intellect so vast, because it is so full of the bear's history, that he "would not (or could not)

close down his mind" (476) when the other bears went into stasis. He is one of only a few

characters allowed "to move freely within the Is" (476), and there Avrel develops magical

abilities that give the heroes a much-needed advantage in the final battle. Every Teller of

Ways in the series is recorded as a male bear, holding great prestige in their culture and in the

series itself. Therefore, while a colonial mindset is used to devalue the Pennykettle's oral

tradition, D'Lacey's world inverts that expectation when it comes to the bear's oral tradition.

In one regard this is good, but it begs the question of why the matrilineal oral history holds

less power than the patriarchal oral history the bears tell. Particularly given that the stories have the same origin and share many characters. It seems *LDC* creates a hierarchy of narrative within itself where written word is supreme and oral traditions carry less power— and the more feminine the oral tradition, the less power it holds overall.

Once again it must be asked, since the power of writing seems to be supreme, who gets to do that writing? In *LDC*, that power is left almost exclusively to men. It is first seen when David writes the true story of the squirrels in the neighborhood. Then this power becomes far more meta when, in the third book, a monk writing with a dragon's claw seems to be authoring David's own story (*Fire Star* 409-410). Writing worlds and people into existence is quite the metafictive action for a character, one that is directly parallel to an author's own power. It seems far too coincidental that only men have the power of authorship in a universe created by a male author. I offer that, even if subconsciously, D'Lacey may be keeping the power of creation on the sides of Hourihan's binaries he exists on. In a written Q&A at the end of the final book D'Lacey identifies himself with the character of David, explaining "he is based on me when I was a young man" (*The Fire Ascending* 560). As a writer, it makes sense that a character based on himself would also be a writer. However, the immense power given to writers in the series, a power greater than any other magic, reasserts the dominance of several of Hourihan's binaries. For example, Hourihan notes that the traditional hero is always "white, male," and from a "civilized order" (9). A marker of European colonial supremacy was the use of the written word over oral traditions. Therefore, not only is the limiting of authorial power to men an oppressive aspect of this series, but limiting this power to the European ideal of recoding history marks it as equally problematic.

In fairness, there is one instance of a women writing with the dragon claw in the series, a powerful action that has far reaching consequences. Gwilanna dies in the end of the fifth book, and her counterpart in an alternate reality, Aunty Gwyneth, is near death when she writes, "I, Gwyneth, also known as Gwilanna, live" (*Fire World* 495). This is the only instance of a woman using the claw, and it is for completely selfish reasons. She uses the power of creation not to help in the cosmic struggle between good and evil, but to simply preserve her life and reinsert herself into a narrative she had exited. The motivation guiding this action undermines D'Lacey's attempt to create empowered women. Hermione Syndrome focusses on the systematic and systemic way women are kept from power, and here we see D'Lacey using the age-old folklore trope of women wielding power for destructive ends. This perpetuates the pattern, or Hourihan might say a binary, where women and monstrosity are linked. The logical conclusion then, which we see played out repeatedly in hero narratives, is that is must be safer to keep women out of power altogether. It is clear from reading D'Lacey's work that keeping women from power was not a goal of *LDC's* narrative, but the ways in which the narrative closes does just that.

And the ~~Meek~~ Male Shall Inherit the Earth

I began this chapter discussing the ways in which endings, or closure, impacts the meaning of narratives and the ways readers interact with, or understand, the narrative events leading to that ending. DuPlessis's work investigates how women authors of the 20th century "call into question political and legal forms" through dismantling the narrative forms of the day (x). Specifically, how the "invention of strategies that sever the narrative from formerly conventional structures of fiction and consciousness" can lead to liberation (x). She calls

these strategies "writing beyond the ending" where writers abandon a traditional ending, and in doing so, push back against dominate, oppressive ideology. However, the opposite is equally possible—an ending can take the progressive movement of a piece and sabotage its own message though a return to a traditional ending. Such a "happy ending" is seen as a return to the way things should be according to dominate ideology. Unfortunately, *LDC's* ending creates a singular male savior, steeped in biblical allusion, and removes the women of the story from the power that was theirs, thus subjugating these characters to Hermione Syndrome at the last moment.

Part of Hourihan's argument against relying on narrative binaries is that stories told repeatedly naturalize their narrative into a culture, thus becoming what is normal and expected. Some of the oldest narratives in Western culture are the tales from the Bible, and their influence can be seen in almost every aspect of public and private life. Whether it is monuments of the Ten Commandments outside of courthouses, or the limited space for women in "classic" stories, biblical influences permeate our culture. Therefore, when fiction picks up tropes from biblical tales, and/or directly alludes to them, unless they are working to subvert the hegemonic and oppressive aspects of these stories, the fiction reinforces the ideology of subjugation. In *LDC*, while David is the main hero of the texts, a new male heir to power arrives in the form of Liz's unborn child, Joseph Henry, in the final book. Speaking of events that happened in book five, David explains that Joseph Henry's "auma left [Liz's] body before he could be born. It entered her house dragon, Gwillan, who stole the powers of several other dragons…" (*The Fire Ascending* 223). Joseph Henry then joins in the great battle and is caught in Gadzook's "sometimes" but navigates his way to the Is where he observes and influences all of time and space.

The language surrounding Joseph Henry directly alludes to the language surrounding Jesus, labeling him as the savior of the narrative. When Agawin, Alexa's previous boy life, is about to die, magical firebirds come to his rescue saying "*Do not be afraid. Joseph Henry is with you*" (*The Fire Ascending* 260, italics in original). They also speak about Joseph Henry as if his power is absolute, reassuring Agawin that he will be safe even as he must "*go back, to observe Gwilanna. Joseph Henry himself has decreed this. You will be hidden form the sibyl – but always within her sight*" (*The Fire Ascending* 261, italics in original). Joseph Henry, in human form, is always wearing "a robe of shining white" (*The Fire Ascending* 266). He also behaves as a god, manipulating timelines and people and being upset when "everyone has the annoying habit of using their…free will to get involved" (*The Fire Ascending* 273). Finally, a direct refence to the Bible is made as Joseph Henry gets an idea from a "large book, with gold-tipped pages and a ribbon to divide them. There was no dragon auma attached to it, but I could feel it fizzing with boundless energy" (*The Fire Ascending* 279). Joseph Henry explains, "Several Premen wrote this…I like the early stories the best. In this section an old man rescues animals from a flood. They ride a boat with him until they find land. Then he frees then animals and the world begins again," (*The Fire Ascending* 280) clearly referencing the Genesis account of Noah's Ark. Therefore, the text not only alludes to the Joseph Henry with savior centered language, but also implies the character's motivations were inspired by the Bible. And the Biblical references stretch far past Genesis into the New Testament, specifically with Joseph Henry closely paralleling Jesus.

Joseph Henry being a savior character inspired by Jesus is not inherently problematic for a progressive narrative. However, how he goes about saving the world reinforces many of the negative cultural expectations that have grown from a single, male-centered hero

narrative. For instance, he is the first male in the matrilineal line of women who have been keeping the spirit of the final dragon alive, and he is able to overcome the evil they have been fighting for thousands of years without even being born. Where countless women had failed to eliminate evil, in his fetal state, Joseph Henry is powerful enough to reset the entire cosmos. This narrative choice plays directly into Hourihan's binary framework for men and women. For the text seems to suggest that there is something inherently more powerful and heroic about this male heir than all the previous women who had come before. It naturalizes the idea that a boy could do this, whereas the women who had been fighting for generations were merely preparing the way for him.

Further, the way in which Joseph Henry dismisses almost the whole cast of the books for him to defeat the final evil reaffirms the idea of a singular male savior (see Chapter 1). When he appears to David, Zanna, Lucy, and others preparing to fight in the final battle, he tells them, "There is no battle for any of you" (*The Fire Ascending* 496), which turns out to be correct as these characters do not appear again until the Joseph Henry resets the cosmos. Even Agwain/Alexa, who is known as the prophesied "*Gatekeeper. Protector of humankind*" (*The Fire Ascending* 425, italics in original) does not do her protecting within the text, readers must assume she is doing it somewhere off-page.

Joseph Henry does say that he needs the cooperation of Gwilanna to overcome the true villain of the series, Voss, who only appears in the final book. Voss, who is Gwilanna's father, usurps her place as villain in the text, ultimately robbing her of her role within the narrative. In all seven books, she desperately wants to comingle with a dragon, and when she gets that opportunity from her father in the final text, an un-written conversation with Joseph Henry makes her abandon that achievement and come to the side of the heroes (*The Fire*

Ascending 495, 506). Also, she knows that aiding them will cost her own life, which she has preserved for over 20,000 years. She uncharacteristically goes along with it anyway, even as just one book before she ruptures space and time with her writing herself back to life with the dragon claw (*The Fire Ascending* 510, *Fire World* 495). Gwilanna goes as far as to say, "I'm glad the real villain wasn't me in the end" (*The Fire Ascending* 510), while she and Joseph Henry are being erased from existence in order to defeat Voss. It is also unclear what Gwilanna actually does in the final confrontation. She is offered this chance at redemption through her participation, but all she does is talk to Voss while he naturally implodes from the "dark fire" within him. In this section, Gwilanna acts completely out of character in a way that I can only explain as the author seeking to redeem her. She is robbed of her defining characteristics and motivation, and simply goes along with the will of the savior boy, even as her action is unneeded for his plan to succeed.

While Gwilanna's sacrifice feels out-of-character and somewhat meaningless, the sacrifice made by Joseph Henry once again reminds us of the biblical narrative his character alludes to. He knows he will die and be erased from existence once his plan concludes and time restarts. He will simply become a still-born child that was never alive. This sacrifice is written to be seen as noble, the ultimate show of love for others. However, his actions simply rob the other characters of efficacy and agency in their own lives and puts them into an alternate version of time where they have no say of where they end up (*The Fire Ascending* 515-559). This savior narrative is old and has been told repeatedly through Western culture. Even as many of the components of *LDC* leading to this ending would appear to push back against that type of traditional story, having Joseph Henry take full control, resetting the universe in the way he does, removes all power of choice from the other characters who had

been so fully empowered in the previous six novels. This powerlessness is a backwards

rupture in the story, much like I experienced with *The Last Battle.* All the moments leading

to this ending feel far more hollow and less empowering since we now know that, in the end,

it is just the will of the fetus, Joseph Henry, that matters.

This backwards rupture is further bolstered by seeing where all the characters end up

in the reset timeline Joseph Henry creates. Alexa goes from being the highest point of human

evolution—an angel—to being a movie star known for her stunning good looks, being

described as a "pretty" child and an "indeed gorgeous" adult (*The Fire Ascending* 515, 529).

Zanna devolves from a powerful sibyl to a woman who "has a successful line of natural

health and beauty products, used by men and women alike" (*The Fire Ascending* 535). Liz is

simply dead, having died while giving birth to the still-born Joseph Henry (*The Fire

Ascending* 537). And Lucy, the most Hermione-like of the characters, does not appear in the

ending at all, except a passing mention that she has married a man several years her senior

who she flirted with in previous books (*The Fire Ascending* 548). While all the women, with

the exception of dead Liz, are successful in life, they all take on such stereotypical roles that

their new life rings hollow when compared to the epic existence they had before. I believe

D'Lacey tried to give them empowered lives in their final reality, but leaned too heavily on

feminine stereotypes, truncating their progressive natures. In a clear metaphor, all throughout

the series it was the Pennykettle family readers had been following—Liz and Lucy and all

the people they brought into their lives. But in this alternate, end reality they are the

Merriman family, married out of their name and missing the true power they held before.

However, not all power nor magic is lost when the world resets. The male hero,

David, gets to reconnect with his former, empowered life. In the end reality, David is a

famous, successful author—what he always wanted to be. In another turn of metafiction, he is the best-selling author of *The Last Dragon Chronicles* series (*The Fire Ascending* 531). He is also the only character to reconnect with magic. In the closing pages of the series he visits Liz's grave, who was his adoptive mother in this reality. While he visits her, Gadzooks appears in his mind's eye, then actually appears on the grave. In the closing words of the series, Gadzooks "blows the prefect smoke ring. It drifts upward and catches in David's nostrils. The scent of dragon fire. Powerful. Real" (*The Fire Ascending* 559). It seems that David gets to reconnect with the magic and power that was lost, and to live out his dream in the final ending, whereas the women of the series are left to far more mundane lives, separated drastically from who they had been in their former existence. Or they are simply dead.

Trites writes extensively on how power is distributed within adolescents' texts, and how "power can be both repressive and enabling" (79). She also argues that meaning depends on how narratives end, their closure, and who inherits power and/or learns about their powerlessness in situations (10, 19). *LDC* clearly redistributes power in its final text away from many of the key female players and places it in the unborn hands of a white, male savior. This action, along with David having the only magical connection remaining in the final scene, retroactively infects the female characters with Hermione Syndrome. While D'Lacey's writing had been truly progressive for the time, his return to a traditional ending removes these women characters from the power that had been theirs. In a world governed by "sometimes" the only thing he finalizes is a return to normalcy with shallow representations of female empowerment.

Conclusion

I want to be clear that I am not attempting to create a list of good and bad writing habits that create or avoid Hermione Syndrome. The cure to Hermione Syndrome cannot be a binary, as that structure is the very system I am hoping YA fantasy can transcend. As I hope I made clear in this chapter, there are genuinely amazing things D'Lacey did with *LDC* concerning the female characters he created. Yet still, he created an ending which robbed those characters of so much of what made them who they are. He also fell into some of the traps I have mentioned earlier in this thesis, with some female characters relationships being focused on fighting over a man (*The Fire Ascending* 470), having a mother's existence focus solely on her child for an extended portion of her life (*Dark Fire, The Fire Ascending*), and even writing out women characters when the male hero no longer needs them (*The Fire Ascending* 486).

For six books, *LDC* pushed back against the Patriarchal Symbolic Order of language and narrative, and in hook's words was "visionary" (110) in the way it imaged a universe full of endless possibilities and "sometimes." And even in the final book, many positive deconstructions of power structures took place that shone a light on the deep-rooted inequality that feeds oppression. Unfortunately, even for all its progressive motion, the series did not "write beyond the ending" (DuPlessis x) of a hero narrative. Instead, it retreated into tradition and reaffirmed many of the binaries and systems which it had so successfully been dismantling.

No piece of writing will be perfect, and I am not calling for malice towards any of the characters or series I am diagnosing with Hermione Syndrome. Instead, I hope we can be equally praiseworthy and critical of these characters—enjoying their moments of

empowerment while acknowledging that they have only been able to go so far. Much as

DuPlessis called for women to continue to "write beyond the ending" of narratives, so too do

I call for writers of YA fantasy to consider the endings they create and push those endings

towards a world of limitless potential instead of traditional, binary safety.

Chapter 4: "She Wasn't Even in that Book":

Re-reading Garth Nix's *The Keys to the Kingdom*

I first read Garth Nix's *The Keys to the Kingdom* series when I was 13 years old and was enraptured in both the adventure and sacrilege I was indulging in. God is a woman in this series, pushing back on my fundamentalist upbringing, and the boy-hero of the series, Arthur, was a character in which I could easily see myself. Therefore, I voraciously read every published book, then secretly badgered my town's children's librarian to get new ones as soon as they were published. As soon as I could, I read each book, and I was awed by Nix's long-term planning and world building. I did not actively think about the series again until I considered it for this thesis. I relied on my memory of the series to talk about it with my master's cohort, and even got into a disagreement with another student. She had read the series too and said the character Leaf, a fellow student at Arthur's school, was her favorite. She liked how active a role Leaf took in the story and how she was featured in every book to some meaningful degree. I then, falsely, countered that Leaf did not show up in the series until the last couple books. Indeed, I dug my heels in so much that my colleague conceded that her memory may be faulty. However, when re-reading the series, I realized I was completely wrong about Leaf and my memory had been the inaccurate one. I felt thoroughly chagrinned that I had argued with my fellow graduate student with all the confidence imbued in me as a man navigating this world. (I have since apologized to this classmate and do it again now—You were correct, and I was wrong. I am sorry.) This series of events made me wonder what cultural mechanism allowed me, as a boy, to remove a major female character from my memory? I do not ask this to excuse my behavior, but to investigate how such a pivotal character in a favorite story of mine could simply cease to exist in my memory.

Was it my reading or Nix's writing that was at fault for Leaf slipping out of my memory? As Valerie Krips argues in her book, *The Presence of the Past: Memory, Heritage and Childhood in Post-War Britain*, memories of childhood texts are incredibly complex as they cannot be totally extricated from their past context. She writes, "This is because our memories, including those about the book, have been reworked. To this insight there can be no objection; it is clear that memories change with us" (15). She is specifically writing about the change that occurs when an adult re-reads a book they read as a child but, as Maria Nikolajeva argues in *Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature*, this change in memory can also happen much earlier. She notes that children "have a less developed memory to process, store, retrieve and reconnect lived and mediated experience" (17) and that childhood memories do not "render an event as it was experienced, but rather as it was encoded and stored" (146). Therefore, while my adult reading of Nix's work is far removed from my first one, so too might that first reading be somewhat removed from the actual text I engaged with. That is to say, even as I read it the first time, the memories I created were based off my lived experiences interacting with the text, which can never be read, understood, or remembered in a social vacuum. I offer that neither the writing nor teenage me was solely responsible for the lapse, but that the intersection of the way Leaf was written and my identity at the time (white, American, male, teenager) made her seem far less important to me than her true role in the story. In my memory, her accomplishments were handed to the hero of the story, and she faded into the background. I had, in my own mind, given Leaf an incredibly strong case of Hermione Syndrome.

This is not the first time a fictional character has been incorrectly remembered. When *The Hunger Games* movie was released in 2012 there was controversy over the character of

Rue, who is described in the book as being dark skinned and was portrayed in the film by an African American actress. Some fans were shocked to see a black actress playing a character they had assumed was white. Anna Holmes' *New Yorker* article "White Until Proven Black: Imagining Race in Hunger Games" looked at this phenomenon. One Twitter user, @MAD_1113, tweeted, "Rue is black?!? Whaa?!" and another said, "Why is Rue a little black girl?" using the hashtag "#sticktothebookDUDE" (Holmes). These white readers seemed to have glossed over the physical description of Rue in the books where it is clearly written that she "has bright, dark eyes and satiny brown skin" (Collins 98). As Holmes notes, "In addition to offering object lessons in bad reading comprehension, Hunger Games Tweets…illuminated long-standing racial biases and anxieties." She goes on to point out the insidious nature of these tweets, such as the message @sw4q made, saying, "Awkward moment when Rue is some black girl and not the little blonde innocent girl you picture" (Holmes). For these readers, the race of the character was deeply intertwined with ingrained preconceived notions about childhood innocence that determine which characters are worthy of sympathy. Rue's unmistakable blackness in the film challenged these ideas.

In *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature,* Margery Hourihan investigates the systems by which society assigns differing values to certain identities that are often understood as binaries. She mainly focusses on the Hero Narrative and who gets to fill the role of hero: "The hero is white, and his story inscribes the dominance of white power and white culture" (58). While *The Hunger Games* challenges this monolithic idea of hero since its protagonist is a girl, the whiteness of nearly every character cannot be ignored. Even the few people that are not white, like Rue, are made white in some readers' imaginations when they are not able to separate heroism or innocence from

whiteness. Instead of changing the way they thought about those ideals, they simply changed Rue's identity in their own minds.

As a teenager, I did a similar mental rewrite of Nix's story when I misremembered the pivotal role Leaf played in the series. Perhaps girlhood and the role of the hero were so far separated for me when I was young that it was easy for me to give the credit for her accomplishments to the hero. Or perhaps it was because I was so used to reading fantasy, which in its traditional, basic form pushes for a consolidation of power within a singular hero (see Chapter 1). Since Leaf is not the hero of the story, but a sidekick, I ignored her importance and gave it to the character I could most identify with—the white boy. Significantly, I did that to Nix's work, even as the series is full of powerful, important women that shape the story just as much, if not more than, the main character Arthur.

Nix is known for his well-developed female characters, most notably Sabriel from the *Old Kingdom* series. He also works to break women out of stereotypical roles in the universe of *The Keys to the Kingdom*. The basic premise of *The Keys to the Kingdom* is that god, known as The Architect, wants to die but cannot do so until nearly all her creation is destroyed (*Sunday* 363). While the reader, and Arthur himself, thinks he is going about consolidating the living Will of the Architect and collecting the keys of power to bring back the missing Architect, he is in fact amassing enough power for the Architect to trick him into destroying the universe (*Sunday* 359). Each book in the series follows Arthur challenging a Trustee of the Architect, each named for a day of the week, and consolidating the power all seven hold. In the end of series, after he has been tricked into destroying the universe, Arthur, now immortal and all-powerful, must recreate reality.

Throughout the series Arthur must challenge his own gender biases. For example, he assumes a male firefighter rescues him from his burning school but then later realizes "that the face he was looking at was a woman's" (*Monday* 121). Further, Arthur's adoptive mom is their country's premiere epidemiologist and it is never questioned that a woman would hold this role (*Monday* 43). In the universe created for the series by Nix, women are written to stand out, and work against, many of the forces I have identified as Hermione Syndrome. However, by relying on the dominate narrative forms of fantasy, he created a story that still occasionally reflects the patriarchy of the real world. My familiarity with the fantasy genre allowed 13-year-old me to remember/rewrite the narrative in ways that paralleled dominate ideology instead questioning it. As Nikolajeva writes, the gap between text and reader must be approached both "ontological[ly], that is, address[ing] the correlation between reality and its representation" and as "epistemological: how do we know what we know; how do we process the information we receive through fiction?" (21).

This final chapter is an epistemological exploration of my (mis)reading experience. It is an attempt to situate Hermione Syndrome not only within the text but also beyond it in our culture, ideologies, and identities. I will start with a brief explanation of the Foucauldian model of power I use to interrogate my experience. Next, I will discuss two possible reasons for my misreading of the text, one based in biology and one in culture. I will then offer an investigation of the text itself, one that elucidates the small cracks still remaining in Nix's writing that helped facilitate my own misreading. Finally, I will conclude by posing some questions about the complex relationships among author, text, reader, and culture that shape our readings of texts.

A Model of Shared Power

A conventional understanding of power, which is often recreated within fantasy texts, is that power is enforced from the top of a hierarchy upon those beneath them, repressing them and controlling what they do. While this can be seen as true in some way, philosopher Michel Foucault offers a far more nuanced and collaborative model for how power is wielded in the real world. Foucault wrote many texts on his ideas surrounding power and control, but he lays his ideas out very clearly in a 1977 interview with Alessandro Fontana. He talks about an "economy of power" where control is not solely applied from the top down but is "distributed in such a way that [is] continuous, uninterrupted, adapted, [and] individualized throughout the entire social structure" (137). In this way, power is distributed among all players in a society and the actions of each person help create and recreate the dominant ideology of a culture. Ideology, loosely defined, is the ways in which we understand the world to work. Every person has their own ideology, but each culture has a dominant ideology that dictates what is acceptable and perceived as good within that culture. This dominant ideology is the norm of a society that most people fight to uphold as they maintain the status quo instead of opposing it. In terms of Nix's universe, one could read the text as Arthur consolidating power solely unto himself and then forcing it on all others, or one could read it in a more Foucauldian sense where all the players of the story work, wittingly or unwittingly, to create the circumstances that lead to the demise of the universe. Ideologically, believing that power only resides in the hands of the people on "top" of society relieves those "below" them of any responsibility for shaping or changing the ideological bent of their world. However, with Foucault's framework, every person needs to be conscious of how they either repress or support others.

Further, Foucault states that "the notion of repression is entirely unable to account for what power itself produces" (136), adding, "if all it does is to say no, do you really think that one would obey it? What makes power effective, what makes one obey it, is that in fact it produces things, it produces pleasure, it creates knowledge, produces discourse" (137). He is arguing that power does not only hold people back from what they want to do, but actively rewards people too. One such award might be making them part of a dominant social group. In this light, power actively rewards people for following dominate ideology and punishes those who deviate. That punishment comes not just from the top, but from all people who submit to or agree with dominant ideology.

This diffusion of power can also be seen in the reader/author relationship of a text. Reader Response Theory is an area of study that examines the ways in which readers create meaning out of texts. As Robert Dale Parker writes in *How to Interpret Literature,* "Scholars disagree about whether readers make meaning in collaboration with texts, such that texts shape and limit how readers can interpret them, or whether…readers bear sole responsibility for their interpretations" (332). I stand on the collaborative meaning-making end of this debate, in that I believe a reader and text create meaning together, reined in by the boundaries of the text and the norms of their culture. However, I also believe that the reader and text both bring ideological stances with them that will either mesh or collide with each other. When they mesh, readers' beliefs are reinforced. When they collide, readers must either allow space for their beliefs to be examined and challenged, or they must reject or forget the aspects that run counter to their ideological stances. Just as Foucault writes that power is diffused, so too is the power to create characters diffused between the author and the readers of a text.

Because reading is interactional, an author could write a perfectly anti-Hermione-Syndrome character, but the reader who creates that character in their mind could still infect her with Hermione Syndrome. The power to create these characters exists first in the mind of the author, but once the work is public, the power to recreate a character is diffused among all readers. Further, both the author and reader are already working within the ideology of their own (and often-times shared) societies. Therefore, even before a character is published, she has been affected by the dominant ideology of the author's society. She may be written alongside that ideology or opposed to it in an attempt to either flip or transcend binaries. Most characters and narratives, especially ones that are complex, do both at once.

In the case of my first reading of Nix's *The Keys to the Kingdom*, 13-year-old me recreated the character of Leaf to conform to dominant ideology, even though her character resists such easy classification. My reading stripped her of much of her efficacy and gave it to the hero. As the reader, I had the power to do this, even as the text was set up to push me ideologically in a different direction. As Foucault says, ideology "is always in opposition to something else" (136), and the patriarchal ideology I was blindly operating under at 13 was indeed in opposition to how Leaf was written. Therefore, in order for me to feel consistency within myself and my reading of the text, I felt the need to infect Leaf with Hermione Syndrome.

Can My Brain Take Blame?

During my K-12 education and the beginning of undergraduate education, I was taught that boys and girls inherently think differently because the male and female brain are intrinsically different organs. I was also taught that boys have a harder time with reading and

that they will only remember things that relate directly to them. If I were to stay within this understanding, I would have a free pass for misremembering Leaf's role in the story. It would not be my fault, nor would any ideological pressure be complicit in shaping my memory. Instead, it would simply be the confluence of the "facts" that I was a boy, reading was hard for me, and since Leaf was a girl, my brain automatically, naturally, and excusably forgot her. However, there are several things wrong with coming to that conclusion. First, reading was not hard for me. I always excelled as what were labeled "girl subjects" and had to work much harder at "boy topics." And secondly, I read stories where the protagonist was a girl all the time and have had no trouble recalling those with far more accuracy.

Even though this thesis is firmly rooted in the humanities, I think it is important to engage with antithetical arguments focused on biological differences between boy and girl brains. First, it is important to debunk the idea that the male and female brain are different organs. Dr. Lise Eliot, a professor of neuroscience, in her article "Single-Sex Education and the Brain," argues against educating youth in gender-specific ways. She says, "The basic brain mechanisms of learning and memory do not differ between girls and boys, and controlled studies of actual learning processes have not identified any meaningful gender differences, from infancy through adulthood" (375). She goes on to say that "the misleading presentation of isolated biological findings has fueled a growing belief in 'hardwired' gender differences that can only be managed through fundamentally different, and segregated, educational methods" (375). It seems, therefore, that simply claiming I have a boy-brain is not an adequate excuse for dismissing Leaf from my memory.

If, then, the male and female brain are not inherently different, how can the observed differences between men and women be explained? Widaad Zaman and Robyn Fivush

investigated this as they examined parent-child relationships in their article "Gender

Differences in Elaborative Parent-Child Emotion and Play Narratives." They concluded that

parents speak and treat children differently, depending on the gender of the child:

"Specifically, parents were more engaged with sons than daughters when discussing a

parental conflict, but more engaged with daughters than sons when discussing a special

outing" showing "children may be more exposed to gendered ways of reminiscing through

modeling their parents." This implies "that children may be learning how to narrate in both

female- and male-stereotyped ways, but adopt their same parent model for their own

reminiscing" (600). This research points out that gendered ways of remembering are not

biologically inherent but are instead learned traits. Therefore, both long- and short-term

memory are malleable within any given cultural context, influenced by social constructs such

as gender. Even if Leaf left my memory because I was taught not to remember her in

meaningful ways, that seems to be a behavior that can be unlearned and remedied.

One aspect of biological memory retention that does hold up to current research is the

connection between interest and memory. "Motivation and Learning—The Role of Interest in

Construction of Representation of Text and Long-Term Retention: Inter- and Intraindividual

Analyses," by Abdelmajid Naceur and Ulrich Schiefele, looks at the way a child's interest in

reading material connects to their ability to remember it. They find that "topic interest was

most highly (and significantly) related to outcome measures indicating deep levels of

learning" (157) since "interest should motivate students to elaborate new information, think

about this information more deeply, and therefore build up a strong…understanding" (158).

They also found that "interest was most strongly related with gender" (162), meaning that

boys and girls, on average, were interested in different things, so they retained different

information. Since current research shows that there is no significant biological reason for gender-difference in interest, the difference must be socially learned. Therefore, it seems we teach children, whether actively or passively, what to be interested in and then take those behaviors as naturally occurring. Given these studies, it stands to reason that biology is not responsible for determining how things are remembered, but instead, it is the ideology of the culture in which the person exists that influences what and how things are remembered. Ideology often shapes our understanding of science and research, as seen in the fact I was raised being falsely taught men and women are inherently different, even in the biological components of our brains.

Bill Ashcraft's article "Constitution Hill: Memory, Ideology, and Utopia" looks at the ways ideology causes us to rewrite memories of events that run counter to accepted narratives. He points out that "reality itself is framed by ideology…and that it is impossible for the critic to escape it" (97), showing that there is no "outside" of ideology, only operating with or against it. He also says, "Memory is contained in something more than the official history" (103), explaining that certain ways of remembering can push back against dominate ideology. However, the inverse is far more common, in that memory is adapted to fit within the schema of acceptability. In terms of the ideology of the hero narrative, we have been molded to only accepting one type of hero—male, white, straight, etc. —all the identities in which power usually resides in the outside world. Those who run counter to this ideology, Leaf for example, might be removed from one's memory since she does not fit neatly into the reality our dominate ideology dictates.

Ideology, as it encompasses everything, is inherently political, in both its support for maintaining the status quo and its resistance to change. Bright Molande's article "Rewriting

Memory: Ideology of Difference in the Desire and Demand for Whiteness" contends that one must be very delicate when considering the ideological demands for inclusion since ideological homogeny can erase important differences among people groups. He writes, "Memory is, intricate, delicate, and…politically essential" (173) and explains that ideology cannot survive without living memory pushing it forward as "an erasure of memory would amount to a loss of a sense of destiny and identity" (174). However, he warns that "difference is an imperialist ideology" (177) and that identifying oneself against someone instead of simply separate creates a confrontational relationship in which one will try to convert the other. "The ideology of difference sanctions an 'either-or' logic" (180), which is similar to the discussion of binaries in Hourihan's work. Hourihan carefully lays out how the hero narrative, the foundation of much fantasy literature, relies on the binaries that uphold patriarchal values.

To understand how I was so ready to dismiss Leaf from my memory, I think it is important to discuss my relationship to reading, and reading fantasy specifically, during my childhood. I was raised in a far-right, evangelical, homeschool community and read as an escape from a life in which I felt powerless. I knew I was gay for as long as I can remember, but I did not come out until I had moved away from my family and the larger community we were a part of. I felt powerless because I knew there was no way for me to stop being gay, even as I was raised to believe people could be converted "back to straight." Fantasy literature (most of which I snuck as it was forbidden for "glorifying witchcraft") allowed me into worlds outside of the ideology of my childhood, worlds were I could imagine not living in constant fear of both the divine and mundane. Not all these worlds were ultimately

welcoming, as discussed in Chapter 3. However, I read fantasy voraciously and developed firm, if not nuanced, scripts and schemata for the genre.

According to *The Living Handbook of Narratology,* "Schemata are cognitive structures representing generic knowledge…[that]…are often culturally and temporally specific" (Emmott). These mental constructs are built through observation and repetition, where people form expectations for the world. In my case, I developed schemata for fantasy literature through the hundreds of novels I read as I child. I read them, interpolating both their surface attributes, plot, characters, setting, and their ideological messages. I had created a script and set of expectations, "a temporally-ordered schema" (Emmott), for reading fantasy literature. For example, I knew that the hero would be morally just, there would be a clear line between good and evil, and the adventure would challenge, but not defeat, the hero. I also expected to escape my own world while in the pages of a book, and to see myself reflected in the hero. Series I had read, or started, before *The Keys to the Kingdom*, such as *The Inheritance Cycle, Redwall,* and *Ranger's Apprentice* all helped to form my schemata for fantasy.

Therefore, when I read Nix's work, my mind was already filled with expectations of who the hero would be, how he would act, and how those around him would, and in my mind, should, support him. When reading this series now as an adult, I can see how Arthur and Leaf both push back against the schemata I held at that time, even though, as a child, I was not a nuanced enough reader to allow for those discrepancies. Lori M. Campbell, in her article "And *Her* Will Be Done: The Girls Trump the Boys in *The Keys to the Kingdom* and *Abhorsen* Series by Garth Nix," shows multiple ways in which *The Keys to the Kingdom* pushes back against expected conventions of fantasy. She notes that "Arthur's distance from

and inability to achieve the hegemonic male ideal operates in tandem with Nix's empowerment of the girls who so often outshine him" (211). However, as a reader, I was not able to rationalize nor accept a hero who broke out of the schemata I had constructed. Neither was I able to place the girls helping him as equals, since the role of hero was still singular and all-important to me. Therefore, even as the text was attempting to push back against Hermione Syndrome, my readerly interior was not ready, able, or willing to accept that change. I then forced the narrative back into the schemata for fantasy I had constructed and, in that action, forced Leaf and her accomplishments out of my memory. She did not fit the mold, so I cast her from my memory instead of letting her disrupt my mental construct of fantasy literature.

It seems, then, that my brain itself was not responsible for removing Leaf from my memory of the series. Indeed, biology cannot give a satisfactory answer as to why I did not remember her as being important. One could argue she held my interest the least of the characters (which I contend is true), but that interest is not biologically generated, but socially constructed. This is exactly what Hourihan writes about when she claims, "all stories are ideological" (4) and says that we must deconstruct the hero narrative if we are to move Western society toward a more equitable future. For even as writers are putting ideologically challenging characters on the page, readers still engage with them within their society's dominate ideology, equipped with the schemata they built while inside it. Therefore, writers might take into consideration the ways readers will view their characters under the dominate ideology, and with schemata built from reading other fantasy. Readers, as well, should be encouraged to critically examine the ways they engage with texts that appear to be familiar.

We should all ask ourselves, what is here that aligns with my expectations? What is here that pushes against them?

I now want to pivot into Nix's series itself to answer those questions. In what way is Leaf constructed that either allow for dominate ideology to circumvent her progressive nature or that pushes back against those ideals? The previous three chapters of this thesis look at textual evidence from books that meet the criteria of Hermione Syndrome. While this chapter investigates how Hermione Syndrome can flourish in the mind of the reader instead of on the page itself, a careful textual analysis also reveals ways the narrative still inadvertently supports subjugation. Therefore, while still holding that Nix does an excellent job creating a world where women are empowered and three-dimensional, I will now move to investigate the ways in which dominate ideology still seeps into *The Keys to the Kingdom* and might have contributed to my misreading and misremembering of Leaf.

The Seeds of a Syndrome

To briefly recap, *The Keys to the Kingdom* tells the story of Arthur inheriting godhood and being tricked into destroying all of creation. He can choose to either start the universe again from the primordial stage, recreate it with changes, or recreate it exactly as it was at the moment it was destroyed (*Sunday* 366*).* He chooses the final option, recreating the universe exactly as it was, as we know it to be, and the text clearly approves of this choice as the only moral option. The New Architect, as Arthur in his godhood is called, "had planned to tweak things here or there, particularly on earth, but now he knew he could not" (*Sunday* 367) since the boy he had been "cried out, a cry of such savage pain and loss" (*Sunday* 366) when recreating the world differently was considered. The text's stance is clearly that the

world, as it is, is worth saving and reestablishing. Nix therefore seems to approve of the dominate ideology of his fictional world, since it is framed as immoral to change it. Therefore, it is fair to argue, even after all Arthur and others overcame, Nix is saying the structures which lead to those barriers should not be revaluated or changed. I wish to closely examine the ways Leaf has to navigate Nix's world, which he created then recreated, to find where power lies and where value is awarded. This examination can help explain the ways in which 13-year-old me was hailed as a reader.

During my re-reading, I realized that not all female characters or sidekicks left my memory. I had to ask what ideological pieces were working on Leaf that did not apply to other characters? Specifically, I had no issue remembering either Suzy or Dame Primus who are equally important players as Leaf in the series. While I do not have the space to closely examine these characters in this chapter, the way they navigate the world is quite different than Leaf. Campbell notes that "Dame Primus overturns any possible weakness associated with femininity by being both beautiful and powerful" (213). Leaf, conversely, is not surrounded by the language or ideologies of power. Of Suzy, Campbell writes that she, "in the first few books, completely outshines Arthur" and that "he demonstrates nothing like Suzy's strength, cleverness, and courage" (210). Comparatively, I argue that Leaf is not shown as superior to Arthur, but someone who has equal talent and passion, but is never given the opportunity to use them as the hero.

Three narrative issues combined: lack of consistent focalization, Leaf's value being in her mothering, and the lack of closure she receives, work together to signal that her role in the narrative is not as important as other characters'. I offer, then, that the dominate patriarchal ideology I was unconsciously living with at 13 while reading these books gave me

an easy opportunity to forget about Leaf almost altogether. She simply did not fit my mental mold of a hero. In my misreading, I gave Leaf's power and efficacy to other characters who did not have these same issues, such as the hero or his other helpers in the story.

As was discussed in Chapter 1, the ways in which stories are focalized greatly impact the way we perceive characters. Do they get to speak for themselves, or is their story is completely told from an outside perspective? Or, even if they do get to focalize their own narrative at times, what do those moments focus on? Leaf is in each book, but her appearances in the first and second, where she helps Arthur escape monsters (*Monday* 49, *Tuesday* 59), are focalized through his experiences of the events. In the third book, where she goes on a month-long pirate adventure, we see brief snippets of her story through magical scrying done by Arthur, not through her own experiences (*Wednesday* 236). In the fourth book, Leaf's experiences are focalized from her own perspective, but the mission she goes on is completely focused on Arthur's goals instead of her own (*Thursday* 74). Nearly half of the fifth book is focalized through Leaf, and it shows her heroic nature as she fights against impossible odds but, in the end, she is rescued by Arthur's actions, not her own (*Friday* 358). The sixth book nearly writes Leaf out as she only appears in the very beginning, then is frozen in time until near the end (*Saturday* 197). The final book has several sections focalized through Leaf, but in the end when she asks, "Is there something I need to do?" Suzy tellingly responds, "Wot? Nah" (*Sunday* 329-330) showing the lack of importance Leaf holds the final, cosmic battle. Even as much of the series is focalized through Leaf, I had no memory of these passages in my constructed memory of the books. I did remember Leaf existed in general, and a few things she did, but the parts focalized through her were lost to me. I argue that the importance of these passages did not stick with me because Leaf was not

someone I could see myself in and, further, the importance of these passages were rarely

about Leaf herself, and more about who she was helping.

Leaf is also subjected to the symptom of Hermione Syndrome discussed in Chapter 2

of this thesis, insomuch as her value is based on her ability to provide a type of mothering to

the hero and others. Far less pronounced than the girls of the *Percy Jackson* series, Leaf's

mothering is not as obvious, and is directed mostly at characters other than the hero. In the

fourth book, which is her first time focalizing the narrative, her mission is to find a magical

copy of Arthur that is wreaking havoc on earth. She completes this mission, at great personal

cost, saving Arthur's family, and may others, but not actual finishing what she set out to

do—find her own family and assure their safety (*Thursday* 259). In the next book, Leaf acts

as a mother figure to hundreds of elderly people who had been kidnapped by the text's main

antagonist who planned to drain them of their memories (*Friday* 24). Leaf's own cognitively

impaired aunt is with these elderly folks, and Leaf must do all she can to protect them.

Ultimately, it is Arthur who rescues them and takes them back to earth. However, he leaves

them there just as a bomb is about to go off. Once again, Leaf is left to care for these people

as she must try to bring them into the basement before the explosion (*Saturday* 199). She

succeeds, and this, I would argue, is her greatest success in the text. Her ability to protect

others repeatedly, even at the cost of her own safety and goals, is what makes her a character

the narrative approves of. If she had not mothered/cared for all these people, she would have

been seen as morally bankrupt. Her space in the narrative, and the moral approval of the text,

relies on her willingness to mother others.

Chapter 3 of this thesis focusses on the backwards ruptures that can happen when

certain choices are made at the closures of narratives. In Leaf's case, we see what happens

when no closure is given to certain aspects of the narrative. For the entire series, Leaf is

concerned about her family and how a magical plague is affecting them (*Thursday* 63). Also,

when a miniature nuclear bomb goes off in their town, she is unsure if her family survives

(*Sunday* 63-64). However, at the end of the series, readers never get to find out what

happened to Leaf's family. After Arthur recreates the universe, he splits himself in two, one

part god and the other the boy he had been at the beginning of the series, minus his disability.

That version of Arthur and Leaf go back to earth at the end, and instead of Leaf asking about

her family or anything back at home, all readers see, and the last we words Leaf says are,

"Isn't it amazing, Arthur? You won!" (*Sunday* 374). In her final moments in the text, Leaf

does not seem to care about the family she had fought for throughout seven novels and

instead exalts the hero. In a clear display of Hermione Syndrome, Leaf gives up her own

goals, hopes, dreams, and fears in order to simply offer the hero praise. Her own narrative

gets no closure, and her goals and ambitions are forgotten by the story. Once the hero

finishes his plot, her secondary plot and concerns, which are all matters of life and death, are

not even recognized by the narrative. Yet that is not the case for Arthur. We find out his

family survives, except for his mother, and know that he is going back to help his family

adjust to the loss (*Sunday* 372). This lack of narrative closure for Leaf creates a backwards

rupture in the narrative that labels her as unimportant. I speculate that a major reason 13-

year-old me did not remember Leaf's parts of the story is because those parts never get

finished, leaving them far less impactful than other characters' arcs. This lack of closure also

did not fit my schema for heroes. In my mind, to be a hero was to find resolution at the end

of the story, not to be left wondering.

When I read the books again as an adult scholar, Leaf stood out because I could see the ways her character pushed against dominate ideology and I appreciated all she was able to do, even in the way she is written. I now agree with Campbell that Leaf and Suzy are both "more often the leaders of their own quests and end up getting themselves (and [Arthur]) out of trouble" (215). In the end, I do not think it was only the writing itself, nor just my own unwitting obedience to dominant ideological pressures, but a combination of the two that lead to my rewriting of the series and infecting Leaf with Hermione Syndrome. I had such strong expectations for what a fantasy narrative could be that when this narrative pushed back on those expectations, instead of allowing myself to be challenged, I simply reworked it within my own mind. As Peter Mendelsund writes in *What we See when we Read*,

> The story of reading is a remembered story. When we read, we are immersed.
>
> And the more we are immersed, the less we are able, in the moment, to bring
>
> our analytic minds to bear upon the experience in which we are absorbed.
>
> Thus, when we discuss the feeling of reading we are really talking about the
>
> memory of having read.
>
> And this memory of reading is a false memory. (9)

Truly, all we have of reading is what we remember, and it is therefore paramount to be critical of our own memories to see if they are indeed even close to true. I cannot expect that kind of self-awareness from 13-year-old me, especially as I was reading for escapism. However, now that I am an adult and a scholar, I know that holding myself responsible for my own readings, and misreadings, is the least I can do in my attempt to push back on dominate, oppressive ideology.

Conclusion

Since I returned to a text I read and loved as a child, my most recent reading was laced with surprise at all the aspects of the story which seem new to me, such as Leaf's prominent role. In writing this chapter, I had to attempt to remember who I was over a decade ago, knowing that my previous identity actively influences me still today. Krips offers:

> Our memory—which includes memories of childhood—runs like a thread through our thinking and experiencing. In this sense, we are never free of our past. We are, however, fully capable of reimagining and renarrativizing it; thus, when we come across a book we loved as a child, we meet it from a long perspective, with the accretions of time and socialization upon us. (15)

I feel comforted knowing that while I had misread and misremembered this series, and that misreading reinforced the ideologically oppressive schemata I used for reading fantasy, as an adult I now have the power to consciously change the way I engage with the genre. As I grew as a person, I grew as a reader, and am now able to take for more responsibility for my own readings than I could have as a child.

My previous chapters have all focused on what writers can do to push back against the patterns and forces I have identified as Hermione Syndrome. This chapter asked how Hermione Syndrome might stem from a reader as well. The questions raised by the relationship(s) between author, text, reader, and culture span the entire field of children's literature, and beyond, and will therefore not be succinctly answered here. I simply hope to pose some questions too, questions that if considered might suss out some underpinnings of domination, and possible paths to liberation. First, can we realistically ask child readers to

consciously challenge their literary schemata while reading? If not fully, what can we do to encourage them to be open to new information that pushes back on their beliefs? Then, how can we best help them track the ideology they are unknowingly interpolating in order to let them make conscious decisions about what they hold to be true? The answers to these questions will not be universal, as each reader is unique, but macro-answers to these questions might be found in the works of theorists and educators such as Nikolajeva, Roberta Seelinger Trites, Margaret Mackey, and Ebony Thomas.[1] These scholars all take different approaches to answering similar questions, from pure theory to literary analysis to sharing lived experiences—and I believe it is in the intersection of all these ideas and approaches that we might find answers to our questions.

Second, for adult readers, I think it is very reasonable to ask us to be conscious of our own preconceived notions of a genre, and to investigate what ideology is resting intertwined with those expectations. It is also reasonable to ask us to reinvestigate the narrative of our own childhoods, as I have attempted to do in this chapter. This self-investigation will take effort and practice, but it is achievable. The only real question is, are we willing to do it?

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[1] I do not quote their work directly, but Trites' *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature,* Mackey's *One Child Reading: My Auto-Bibliography*, and Thomas' *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* all inspired the model of investigation I used for this chapter.

Conclusion

Maleficent, a 2014 feminist revision of Disney's 1959 *Sleeping Beauty*, is Disney's least popular live-action adaptation and received the lowest and most negative critical responses of any recent Disney film. *Rolling Stone* gave it 1.5/5 stars, Rotten Tomatoes a 54%, and IMBD, at the high end of the scale, awarded it a tepid 7/10. Further, the general viewing public is divided, with far more disliking the movie. One writer for *The Agony Booth* says that people who see a rape metaphor in the narrative are "lost down a social justice rabbit hole" (NYCEA). The blog *Culture Fall: Upstream from Politics* published the post titled "Maleficent and Why it Sucks," where the argument seems to be that the movie could have been good except for the "odd choice to inject gender politics into the film" (CultureFall). Finally, a writer for *Junkee* says, "However, what makes *Maleficent* a particularly terrible film is the way it reconfigures the central character… reimagined as a hero, done wrong by society. This saps the character of the delicious villainy that Jolie and the gothic design promised" (Dunks).

Why do many Disney fans dislike this film? Based on these reviews, it seems that the only way for powerful women to exist in a story and be liked is if they are a one-dimensional villain or a Hermione-like sidekick. Western culture is so enamored with its own reflection, so in love with the tale that supports its own injustices, that when a story comes along that pushes back against that self-assurance, it is reviled. Anyone who does not fit into predetermined societal roles defined by dominant ideology is rejected. As noted in Chapter 4, Rue from *The Hunger Games* befell this fate, as did other women such as Furiosa of *Mad Max: Fury Road* or Carole Danvers a.k.a. *Captain Marvel*. These fictional women push

against the ideological pillars upholding Hermione Syndrome and end up being disliked by fans who are loyal to genre conventions that usually cast white men in heroic roles.

Despite objections from fans and critics wanting conventional narratives, the past few years there have brought about some promising exceptions to Hermione Syndrome, such as *Maleficent* and Marvel's *Black Panther.* Additionally, there were popular fantasy series written before and during the 2000-2010 era that were already pushing back on the ideology of female submission in more creative ways, such as Daniel Handler's *A Series of Unfortunate Events,* Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, or Brandon Mull's *Fablehaven.* In this conclusion I briefly investigate these narratives in the hope of identifying key factors in combatting Hermione Syndrome that can move us toward a more morally complex and intentional method for writing and reading gender in fantasy.

Maleficent retells the classic Sleeping Beauty tale from the perspective that Maleficent is not evil, but a woman defending her right to exist and wield power. Maleficent, after all, is a character Disney named and created: by highlighting her horns and depicting her presiding over a fiery hellscape, they made her the most memorable and terrifying villain of their early fairytale film collection. In the remake, she is dressed in the same iconic devilish outfit but in this version, she is a sympathetic character motivated by past traumas. A man, who eventually becomes the king and father of Sleeping Beauty, betrays her and rips a significant part of her power away. This tale is about her reclaiming it.

As a result, Maleficent becomes a complex character and not a one-dimensional villain. She is allowed to have flaws and do bad things, while remaining a moral character. She does not need to bend to the will of the traditional narrative structure and is allowed to inhabit herself fully as she seeks recompense for the wrongs done to her and others. In the

end, she succeeds in bringing down the king, literally smashing the king's throne (01:23:35–01:23:38), ending a part of the patriarchy, and setting up a system in which femininity and power coexist in harmony. Maleficent's narrative does not succumb to Hermione Syndrome and its, perhaps radical, feminist message is that a woman can be both powerful and angry while still being good.

Disney, and by default Western culture, went through a kind of story-telling renaissance in the 1980s and 90s wherein heroines became an acceptable narrative choice for mass culture. However, just like the sidekicks that embody Hermione Syndrome, these heroines, such as Ariel, Belle, and Pocahontas, encompass only a liberal sense of feminism, one that stays neatly in the lines or, one might say, within Hourihan's cultural binaries. All of Hermione's radical ideals (not needing a man, SPEW, etc.) are left behind as she grows and "matures" —or, one might say, internalizes the dominate ideology of the world around her. She changes to fit the world, just as much as her actions change her world. This compromise is not inherently bad, but it seems that the level of self-sacrifice needed from these female characters leaves them shells of what their initial radical feminism promised.

Maleficent, however, does not shirk away from her potential in her narrative. She embraces power and uses it to her full capacity, even as that paints her as a villain at times. After Stephan, the soon-to-be king, cuts her wings off her in a violent scene that is clearly meant to be a rape metaphor, audiences see Maleficent's grief, her agony, and the full pain this violation causes her (00:16:30–00:18:59). She seeks both healing and revenge, a path often not open to women in popular narratives even though such motivations have fueled multiple male heroes from *Gladiator* to *Mad Max* to *The Inheritance Cycle*. Maleficent uses her power to create a world where men cannot enter and isolates herself from those that

caused her pain. Her rage breaks through when she curses baby Aurora to die, and the narrative arc of the film shows her regret at that choice, but not her regret for seeking justice. Her fury was righteous, but her curse misguided. She lashes out at an innocent instead of seeking recompense directly from the man who wronged her. While the narrator tells the audience that Maleficent "reveled in the sorrow her curse had brought" (00:34:00–00:34:06) to the king, she is later shown trying to unsuccessfully remove the curse once she realizes her fury was misdirected (00:53:28–00:54:16). And, in the end of this retelling, it is Maleficent's kiss and love for Aurora that breaks her own curse (01:16:42–00:17:09). There is no question in the narrative that her curse was wrong, however, Maleficent still becomes a morally complex agent instead of being condemned by this singular action.

Unlike the goddesses of *Percy Jackson*, whose only value comes from their ability to mother (see Chapter 2), Maleficent makes a terrible magical "mother" initially. She curses a child to die, and only begrudgingly saves her life as an infant from starvation (00:36:45–00:37:10) and nearly falling from a cliff (00:40:50–00:41:30). She commits the mortal sin of womanhood, harming a child (her own child in some readings). A traditional narrative would condemn her to utter villainy, and indeed, *Maleficent's* own source material does. However, in this retelling, she is offered the space to learn, grow, and expand past a singular defining action. Unlike the women of *Percy Jackson*, Maleficent is not solely defined by motherhood. Instead, she gets to encapsulate that role as a part of herself, as one of many roles she plays. In other words, she is given the same moral latitude most heroes have, even as she is not the narrator of her own story.

While the film is focalized though Maleficent's experience, it is a frame-tale told by an elderly Aurora. She opens the film, saying, "Let us tell an old story anew and we will see

how well you know it," (00:00:29–00:00:35) already setting up the expectation for change from the narrative's source material. The original 1959 Disney film is also Aurora's story insomuch that she is the central object, the sleeping beauty, but not an active player. She is depicted as more active in the remake since she acts on her own behalf at times, and specifically by freeing Maleficent's stolen wings (01:20:37–01:21:21). For the most part, however, Aurora is far more acted upon than acting. What then, does it mean that Aurora's largest action in the film is the telling of the story itself? For one, it puts the narration into a firmly feminine, if not feminist, space. Not only is the protagonist a woman, so is the voice that tells us her story. I argue this gives Aurora power, as this is now her story, whichever way she chooses to tell it.

However, this narration also takes some power away from Maleficent's character. She is not telling her own story but is forced to trust that the baby she cursed to die, then rescues, will tell her story truthfully. Thankfully, Aurora tells a complex story that undermines expectations, as seen in how she closes the narrative: "So you see, the story is not quite as you were told…In the end, my kingdom was united not by a hero or a villain, as legend had predicted, but by one who was both hero and villain. And her name was Maleficent" (01:27:14–01:28:14). Therefore, unlike the previous YA fantasies I have examined where women are not the tellers of their own tales, this narrative, while still not having a woman tell her own story, allows for far more moral complexity and self-guided redemption for its female characters. It also calls into question the roles people are called to play, or as Hourihan might say, the binary system of thinking our narratives are usually built upon. Finally, in the closure of the narrative, where Maleficent is reunited with her wings and gets her revenge, we see a culmination of her power, one that takes her above and beyond

what had held her back, literally, as she soars into the limitless sky and not back toward any kind of traditional role (01:28:16–01:28:34). Maleficent is given closure that culminates and matches the rest of her narrative, unlike the women of *The Last Dragon Chronicles* (see Chapter 3). Had Zanna, Liz, and Lucy been given a similar ending, one that propelled them into a future they had built instead of being handed one in which they hold little power, their series would have overcome Hermione Syndrome instead of falling ill with it.

Culture changed enough from 1959 to 2014 for *Maleficent's* new telling of a classic story to hit theater screens across the world. However, culture did not change enough to have its radically feminist, radically anti-Hermione-Syndrome message embraced by a majority of viewers and critics. Until culture changes significantly, radical stories and characters like these will continue to be unpopular and will be overshadowed by narratives that enforce existing norms. But stories not only reflect the world, they actively shape it too. *Maleficent* is one mainstream, commercial example but there need to be more.

There have been many fantasy texts written over the years that challenge oppressive constructions of gender, but few of these were written by men and few have been as commercially successful as the series I cover here. One YA narrative that predates the works I investigated in this thesis, Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000)*,* was fighting against the forces I identify as Hermione Syndrome even before the character for which I named it was created. Lyra is a clearly feminist character, is the hero of her own narrative, which is told from her perspective, and, therefore, she is not a character at risk for Hermione Syndrome. Other women of this series, specifically Ma Costa and Marisa Coulter, are also complex, even while they are mothers because motherhood alone does not define their whole essence. Mary Jeanette Moran, in "'The Mother was the Mother, Even when She Wasn't':

Maternal Care Ethics and Children's Fantasy," argues that the mothers of Pullman's world ultimately push back on the "assumptions that motherly care is a biological, instinctive drive to which all mothers are subject and from which nonmothers are excluded, and that the essence of motherhood is the sacrifice—mind, body, and soul—of the mother for her children" (188). Ma Costa and Marisa Coulter have purpose far beyond their children and use their power for myriad reasons. Both characters stand up to the patriarchy of their own world, fighting to keep the voice and efficacy the hold. Even as they can be seen as foils to one another, their femininity and power are not what is opposed, simply their goals. They both get to be morally complex and imperfect while navigating their world, and they never bend to pressure of traditional roles when that is opposed to their goals.

In Daniel Handler's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999-2006)*,* a near-to-life gothic fantasy series for younger readers, the Baudelaire orphans, two girls and a boy, must escape their evil distant relative who keeps trying to kill them and steal their fortune. Violet, the oldest sibling, is a brilliant inventor; Klaus—the boy—is an avid reader and researcher; and Sunny, their baby sister, is an aspiring chef. In a traditional hero's tale, one that stayed neatly in the lines of Hourihan's binaries nestled within dominate ideology, Klaus would be the leader of his sisters and would repeatedly save the day. And while he does save the three of them often, his sisters do just as much saving too. However, their story is not written in a way that is blind to gender either: The first scheme the must overcome is the plotted pedophilic marriage between their old relative, Count Olaf, and Violet (*Bad Beginning* 143). Much like Maleficent, Violent and Sunny are the protagonists of their narrative, but theirs is also a frame-tale where the narrator, the fictional Lemony Snicket, tells their story. It is clear Snicket has complete control over the story and, even as he purports to tell the whole truth,

often purposefully leaves out details or entire sections of the narrative (*Slippery Slope* 213).

He, and in reality Handler, has near total control Violet and Sunny, and could easily have

subjected them to Hermione Syndrome. However, Violet and Sunny operate autonomously in

their world, tackling challenges and living for themselves as much as for others. Unlike

Paolini's *The Inheritance Cycle* (see Chapter 1), Handler created no central, singular hero to

embody an absolutely moral authority. Therefore, while Arya, Elva, and other girls and

women need to subserve themselves to Eragon to have space within his story, if their

narrative had been written more like Handler's, creating no singular definition or morality

that therefore cannot be embodied by a singular hero, those girls and women could hope to

break free from Hermione Syndrome.

Another series that dodges Hermione Syndrome in many of its characters is Brandon

Mull's *Fablehaven* (2006-2010). This intrusion fantasy postulates that magical creatures of

every variety are real but confined to sanctuaries for their and humanity's protection. The

books follow a sibling pair—Kendra and Seth—as they discover that their grandparents are

caretakers of such a sanctuary and must help them save the world repeatedly. While I argue

that Kendra is a highly feminist and empowered character, especially in that she is both

extremely feminine and powerful, she is the lead of her own story and would not fit the

matrix of Hermione Syndrome. Her brother becomes a co-hero in many books, but Kendra is

always the central heroine. The family is surrounded by allies and enemies, and Mull does an

excellent job of giving each character a nuanced and believable backstory and motivation.

The best example of a character in this series displaying anti-Hermione Syndrome is

Ruth (Grandma) Sorenson. She inhabits spaces investigated by this thesis (Mother & Bride)

but enact these roles in ways that do not reinforce the patriarchal hero narrative but instead

undermine the binaries that support it. For instance, she is a mother and grandmother, a duty

she takes very seriously even though it is not her paramount responsibility. She is willing to

sacrifice for her family, but her true duty lies in her vow to protect the world from the

dangerous creatures the sanctuaries hold. For example, when Ruth negotiates with a

powerful, malevolent being, and knows that she is about to reveal dangerous information, she

explains she "chose not to answer the question…Consequently, [she] opened [herself] up for

retaliation" (Mull 136). This retaliation, being turned into a chicken, took away her ability to

act as caregiver to her family, a condition she knew could be permanent. When faced with

choices between "maternal instinct" and her duty, she chooses her duty and the greater good

of the world. She is not vilified for her actions, even when she must be a "bad mother." Her

life is not only valuable because of her procreation. She has value because of her own actions

and choices. She is also countercultural since her age would relegate her to inaction and

uselessness in traditional tales, but she rebuffs those ageist ideas and continues to be a

valuable and important member of her community.

Just as Grandma Sorenson's older age is not a barrier in her narrative, neither is

Shuri's youth within the *Black Panther* (2018) film. As a fan site for the film notes, "Shuri is

extraordinarily intelligent despite her young age. Indeed, her intelligence marks her as one of

the smartest humans in the world" (Marvel). A tale of Afrofuturism, *Black Panther* pushes

back on countless culturally ingrained ideas of dominance along the lines of race, gender, and

geography. Shuri embodies all these challenges to dominate ideology and is as perfectly an

anti-Hermione-Syndrome character as I have ever come across. She still operates as a

sidekick to her brother (the titular Black Panther), but her purpose and ambition go far

beyond him. She is the head of her country's science division and has her own plans for their

kingdom. She, like Maleficent, has flaws and makes mistakes, but the narrative frames her as growing and developing, instead of morally or intellectually immature. And much like Leaf, from Chapter 4, Shuri seems to be written intentionally counter to expectations. However, where Nix still left gaps for genre expectations to remove Leaf from power, those same gaps are noticeably absent in Shuri's narrative. Indeed, she is so pointedly written in ways that runs counter to Hermione Syndrome that I must assume the authors were intentional in their radical departure from expectations of the genre.

However, the Foucauldian model of power discussed in Chapter 4 shows that it is not only the creators of these characters who hold power, but also the readers who engage with them. On an individual level, readers or watchers must align these characters with the schemata they have already built. For instance, young readers may not have a schema that allows the elderly to be active heroes, and Mull's writing will help to challenge that notion. That reader then has the power to either accept Ruth's character and adjust their thinking, or to reject her efficacy. This rejection may take the form of misremembering the narrative or, as we see in *Maleficent* and many other countercultural narratives, simply "not liking it." While narratives we do not like still inform the schemata we build, they do so in ways that reaffirm what we already believe to be true, such as when things are labeled as "unrealistic." A prominent example of such resistance to change could be the public outcry that occurs every time a black character appears in fantasy narratives in roles other than slave or mage from a distant land. While no one questions if dragons can be real in fantasy, many readers seem to have a schemata for understanding fantasy that excludes blackness (Thomas 4-7).

The correlation I see repeatedly is that the more radically a tale departs from dominate ideology, the more unpopular it is. The more characters veer away from where they

"should be" within the traditional narrative, the more audiences strive to put them back in their place. Of course, audiences are not monolithic and radical narratives and characters also have readers who love them and affirm the space they occupy. Often, these fans see themselves reflected in the character in a way they do not usually get to. Shuri, for example, is a shining example of black women's brilliance, which is hardly ever shown in media. It is no wonder black girls, or any girls, aspiring to be taken seriously in academics and the world would gravitate toward her. Collectively, audiences have the power to shape future narratives, as their demands are taken into consideration when projects are funded. We must use this power to support less-than-popular narratives or characters who push back against dominant ideology. Both individually and collectively, there is always something we can do.

If, then, the responsibility for alleviating Hermione Syndrome cannot be given solely to authors or readers, how can we improve the lot of these female characters in future narratives? According to a Foucauldian understanding of power, we all have a role to play in this project, whether we are readers, writers, or simply those living in the same societies as these stories. The dominate ideology of how these female characters "should act" exists not only on the page, but in the expectations of each person within our society. Perhaps the best place to start in alleviating the expectations of relinquishing power to a male hero is to do so with real-world girls who still are expected to lower themselves in order for boys to feel more secure. Maybe the best way to push for more narratives focalized by and through women is to listen and seek out such stories in the real world. And perchance the best way to make sure girls within narratives receive the closure they deserve is to demand resolutions to women's issues in the real world—such as bringing Breonna Taylor's murderers to justice.

At the very least, we as readers must be conscious of our own readerly history. We must be cognizant of the ideology we bring into our reading and, when writing pushes against those ingrained scripts, be willing to entertain the notion of change. Just because things have "always" been a certain way, that way of being is not inherently correct. When we engage with texts, if we want to truly be open to the narrative, we must hold our expectations lightly and let them inform our journey, not force it down a pre-determined path. Perhaps when readers hold their expectations in check, we can see fictional worlds, and perhaps our own, not for what we expect to see, but for what is actually there. Maybe then we can push dominate ideology away from ingrained power structures and towards a more equitable understanding of both people and fictional characters.

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