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# Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* Series

Tison Pugh and David L. Wallace



In re-creating the venerable genre of the boys' school story, in which a middle-class boy is sent off to boarding school as he approaches adolescence, the *Harry Potter* series infuses twenty-first-century concerns with gender and sexuality into a literary tradition dominated by same-sex educational institutions.<sup>1</sup> The genre's typical focus on homosocial learning environments may appear to foreclose an interest in gender, yet as Beverly Lyon Clark notes of school stories, these narratives are "so marked by gender that it becomes vital to address questions of both the instability and potency of gender" within the genre (11). This tension between the uniformity of gender and its at times disruptive presence within the school story genre bears the potential either to undermine or to reinforce restrictive gender roles. In such a manner, the cross-gendered setting of Hogwarts in the *Harry Potter* books appears to be both a fantastically post-feminist world where sexism no longer undermines women's power and agency and one in which a post-feminist façade merely camouflages the novels' rather traditional gender roles and its erasure of sexual orientation difference.<sup>2</sup> This incarnation of the school story challenges regressive constructions of gender and sexuality in its apparent treatment of boys and girls as equals, but heteronormative heroism ultimately squelches gender equality and sexual diversity in favor of the ideological status quo.<sup>3</sup>

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As much as the cross-gendered school story provides a generic framework for understanding the *Harry Potter* series, the novels also depict the story of a heroic figure in Harry himself.<sup>4</sup> *Potter* criticism has identified Harry as yet another of Joseph Campbell's "hero with a thousand faces"—the familiar tale of an orphaned boy marked at a young age to undertake a quest upon which the fate of a society rests and whose untapped powers must be trained for his epic mission.<sup>5</sup> Our purpose in examining the *Harry Potter* texts as a mixture of school story and hero tale is to argue that, even within J. K. Rowling's exuberantly fantastic plot structures and the ostensibly post-feminist coeducational space of Hogwarts, heteronormative heroism narrows the range of culturally viable narrative actions and plots. Hero stories are gendered as well as school stories, and the heroism demanded for the protagonist of these narratives typically depends upon an alpha-male model of masculinity that systemically marginalizes most other characters, especially in relation to gender and sexual orientation difference.

Any analysis of gender and sexuality in the *Harry Potter* books must begin by acknowledging that the books tell a boy's story—a straight boy's story. Further, the versions of sexism and heterosexism that we see in these books are certainly no more egregious than what is typical in most children's literature and in the world from which they are drawn. Indeed, there is little overt homophobia in the books,<sup>6</sup> and their sexism is muted by the depictions of female characters in positions of power. How, then, should Harry's developing heroism be read in terms of gender and sexual identity? Some critics suggest that Harry's heroism should be read in a predominantly positive light. For example, Andrew Blake contends that, because Harry encourages children to read, he must be seen as a hero. Likewise, Michael Bronski suggests that the books provide an important alternative means for considering constructions of cultural normativity. He argues that although the books are not in any sense "gay," they are "profoundly queer in the broader sense of the word" because they "celebrate a revolt against accepted, conventional life—against the world of the Muggles, who slavishly follow societal rules without ever thinking about whether they are right or wrong, if they make sense or not. They are at heart an attack on the very idea of normalcy" (para.16). In this manner, the *Harry Potter* series queers the traditional form of the school story by undermining structures of normativity. As a foe of ideological normalcy, queerness subverts that which cultures uphold as normative societal values.<sup>7</sup> But if one thus reads the *Harry Potter* books as queer, how queer is this series of texts that flirts with deconstructing normativity while simultaneously upholding some of its most cherished values?

Other scholars have called for more nuanced readings of the operation of masculinity in the *Harry Potter* books. For example, Farah Mendlesohn argues that, although Rowling apparently did not develop Harry's character and the basic plot with specific ideological intent in relation to gender, ideology's "role in her work is inescapable" (159). Monitoring and evaluating genders and sexuali-

ties as normative and non-normative serve as chief regulatory mechanisms of ideology, and given the investment of the *Potter* books in these and other cultural myths, it would be rather surprising if ideological force were absent from the gender and sexual roles depicted in them. Thus, the larger goal of this article is to expose the complicity of heteronormative heroism in the problematic representations of masculinity in the *Harry Potter* books so that parents and teachers can help children place this message in a larger cultural context.

Because of their enormous popularity, the *Harry Potter* books (and the movies based on them) provide an important basis for readers—young and old—to understand the complicated function of heteronormativity in relation to gender and sexual identity in Western culture. As Bronski argues, the books' celebration of a "deviant, nonconformist, renegade identity" invites queer readings (in the broadest sense of the term):

The *Harry Potter* books are a threat to normally accepted ideas about the social welfare and good mental health of American children. Not because they romanticize witchcraft and wizardry, but because they are subversive in their unremitting attacks on the received wisdom that being "normal" is good, reasonable, and even healthy. (para. 4)

By deploying the male-centered and normative structure of the hero story within a nonetheless exuberantly post-feminist school story, the *Potter* series establishes a tension between normativity and queerness, in which queerness might appear to have the upper hand. Because the books seem to challenge the heteronormative foundations of myth, we must therefore pay particular attention to any normatizing tendencies of this hero myth that ultimately trump the novels' investment in queerness.

Further, the extent to which heteronormative heroism dominates the gendered landscape of the *Harry Potter* books must be closely scrutinized because this paradigm of masculinity bears the potential to harm women, men, and children—whether they are gay or straight, pre-sexual or post-sexual, sexually innocent or sexually experienced. As gay men, we have experienced firsthand the ways in which heteronormativity attempts to stigmatize, if not to erase, our existence. Beyond our personal experience, gender policing bears negative effects on all of humanity, including the heterosexual white males who ostensibly inhabit Western society's most privileged cultural position. The danger of heteronormative heroism in the *Harry Potter* books is that it potentially reinscribes the problematic heterosexual/homosexual binary that critics such as Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Jonathan Ned Katz identify as both policing desires and the identities constructed around those desires. This binary serves not only to stigmatize homosexuality and other expressions of sexual queerness; it also contributes to a concept of masculinity that marginalizes women and narrows the range of socially acceptable behaviors for men in ways that work to the detriment of all humanity.

In exploring the ways in which heteronormativity functions within the world of the *Harry Potter* series, our goal is not to demonize the series or to wring our hands in despair over its failure to fight ideological normativity. Rather, because the *Potter* books flirt continuously with disruptions to normativity, the question of the extent to which heteronormative heroism serves as a repressive force of ideology in relation to gender and sexuality becomes critical. Thus, in the body of this article we explore how the *Harry Potter* books both invite and discourage queer readings through the presentation of parallels between textual wizardry and metatextual queerness, how female characters are both featured more prominently than we might expect in a boys' school story but also marginalized, and how reading Harry's emerging masculinity through the lens of heteronormative heroism can help us better understand why his relationships with other important male characters become increasingly attenuated as he matures.

### **Heteronormativity and Latent Queerness in *Harry Potter's* Fantastic Realm**

Heteronormativity is alive and well at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. At first blush, this statement seems fairly inconsequential, as Hogwarts is merely the principal locale of the *Harry Potter* series, and, thus, no actual girls are told that their actions are not "ladylike" and no real boys wonder why they are not attracted to girls but are too frightened to say so because of jokes in the Quidditch locker room about men who like men. Yet, without being overtly homophobic or blatantly sexist, the *Potter* books nonetheless illustrate the ways in which heteronormativity guides readers into culturally normative sex roles. These texts invite readers to enter their fantastic world with considerable readerly pleasure, but the ultimately regressive gender roles bear the potential to harm readers as well. As Jody Norton argues,

Children *are* harmed by the male and female stereotypes developed in traditional literature. First, if the stereotypes are uncorrected, they contribute to the construction and validation of retrograde, politically unequal meanings for males and females. Further, the hegemony of the binary model of sex/gender effaces the indefinite range of variant genderings [and] enforces that effacement with taboo: gender "deviance," . . . if it is visible at all, is sick, disgusting, and immoral. (421–22)

Within the *Harry Potter* novels, gender deviance is indeed invisible. Among the hundreds of major and minor characters in the series, not one is identified as homosexual or in any manner marginalized by heterosexist prejudices. As Harry and his two best friends, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley, mature from eleven-year-old, first-year boarding school students to seventeen-year-old, sixth-year students, they participate in a social context in which burgeoning sexualities flourish yet same-sex attractions are absent. Among the approximately eighty students at Hogwarts featured in the six books to date, not one questions his or her sexual identity, and when students are required to have

dates for parties or balls, couples are always of mixed genders. Beyond the confines of Hogwarts, the entire wizarding world is heterosexually self-contained, such that no lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, or transgender/transsexual (LGBT) people play any visible roles. For example, no pop stars of ambiguous genders, along the lines of David Bowie or Boy George, populate the wizarding bands Rowling alludes to; single adults who move to coupled status do so only with members of the opposite sex; and although we learn the parentage of a number of Hogwarts students, none of them have two mommies or two daddies. Furthermore, the one possible instance of a same-sex pairing, in which the male author of a book on vampires brings a male vampire “friend” to a party, is immediately attenuated when Rowling depicts the vampire “edging toward the nearby group of girls, a rather hungry look in his eyes” (*H-BP* 316).<sup>8</sup>

This omission of queer characters flattens the marvelous range of diversity that otherwise defines Potter’s wizarding world. In a setting of such inspiring fantasy, populated with wizards, unicorns, centaurs, and an extensive range of magical beings, Rowling nonetheless never ventures into the realm of non-normative sexualities. Many of her characters may be half-human, but all are heterosexual, and the lack of any hint of alternative sexual identities makes them representative of sexuality’s normative status quo.<sup>9</sup> Further, given Rowling’s nods toward gender equity by depicting women in positions of power and toward racial inclusion by suggesting that several minor characters are people of color,<sup>10</sup> the omission of queer characters in the books erases a substantial population of characters needed to depict a convincingly twenty-first-century world. In making this criticism, we do not mean to advocate a prescriptive policy toward literature, in which all stories must contain at least one non-tokenized queer character or in which every main character must have a moment of bisexual exploration; however, it is nonetheless disappointing that nowhere in six books do the main characters acknowledge the existence of non-normative sexual identities. The *Potter* world depicts twenty-first-century diversity in myriad ways yet nonetheless fully erases same-sex attraction.

Despite the absence of homosexual characters in *Harry Potter*, the texts nonetheless invite queer readers to make connections between homosexuality and the world of wizardry. Such moments call queer readers to exercise a kind of double consciousness to sort out how the heteronormative textual world that Rowling creates might intersect with the reader’s metatextually queer experiences.<sup>11</sup> In this manner, queer readings provide an important starting point for understanding how heteronormativity functions in *Harry Potter*, and exploring queerness in the texts can help us understand these other effects. Such explorations of the *Potter* texts are particularly important given that their primary audience is comprised of children who enter Rowling’s fictive realm with considerable pleasure.<sup>12</sup>

The most inviting queer reading in the *Harry Potter* series occurs in *Sorcerer’s Stone* when Harry essentially “comes out of the closet” as a wizard. When we first meet him, Harry lives in a dark cupboard (SS 19–20), which seems analogous

to the closeted lives of homosexuals who do not publicly reveal their sexual orientation. Further, had Harry not attended Hogwarts as a wizard, he was to attend “Stonewall High, the local public school” (SS 32), a detail that invites the queer reader to wonder whether Rowling, who is often playful and suggestive in her choice of names, was aware of the homosexual connotations of *Stonewall*.<sup>13</sup> *Stonewall* carries many decidedly queer meanings, as it refers to the gay bar in New York City that many historians credit as the foundational site of the modern gay rights movement in America.<sup>14</sup> Did Rowling intend to hint that, had Harry not come out of the closet as a wizard, he would have lived an equally non-normative life as a Muggle, as the text symbolically suggests that this non-normativity could include sexual non-normativity?

The parallels between Harry’s discovery of his status as a wizard and homosexuals coming out of the closet do not end with suggestive references to his cupboard/closet and to Stonewall High. Rather, Harry’s discovery of the wizarding world in *Sorcerer’s Stone*, as well as his Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon’s fear of all things magical, lead him to question Muggle normativity in ways that are strikingly similar to the ways in which queer coming-out stories question heteronormativity. It is clear from the outset of the *Potter* series that normativity is not a virtue that the reader is intended to appreciate precisely because Harry’s stodgy guardians privilege it so zealously. The opening sentence of *Sorcerer’s Stone*—“Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much” (SS 1)—condemns normativity by linking it so inextricably to the text’s blustering Muggle antagonists. The forcefulness with which this theme opens *Chamber of Secrets*—as Uncle Vernon bellows, “I WILL NOT TOLERATE MENTION OF YOUR ABNORMALITY UNDER THIS ROOF” (CS 2)—demonstrates to the reader the chilling effect that cultural codes of coercive normativity bear upon unique and non-normative individuals.

The Dursleys’ fear of magic operates in a fashion similar to homophobia. For example, just as many people do not actually fear homosexual people or homosexuality itself (claiming instead to disdain it), the Dursleys fear that their neighbors, family, and business associates will discover their association with magic and the wizarding world almost as much as they fear magic itself.<sup>15</sup> At the end of *Order of the Phoenix*, the threat of association with magic and odd-looking people appears at least as powerful an incentive for the Dursleys to treat Harry humanely as the threat of any spell he might cast on them. In this scene, a number of Harry’s adult wizard friends confront the Dursleys when they arrive at the train station to take him home for the summer, and the Dursleys’ discomfort with being seen publicly in the company of Harry’s odd-looking wizard friends illuminates their obsession with normalcy. Alistair (Mad-Eye) Moody offers Harry a farewell of magical solidarity, and Petunia’s response to his words indicates that the fear of associating with magical people (rather than magical acts themselves) will ensure the Dursleys’ decent treatment of Harry:

“So, Potter . . . give us a shout if you need us. If we don’t hear from you for three days in a row, we’ll send someone along . . .”

Aunt Petunia whimpered piteously. It could not have been plainer that she was thinking of what the neighbors would say if they caught sight of these people marching up the garden path. (*OP* 870)

In this scene and others similar to it, the queer reader infers that wizard phobia is parallel to homophobia in that both are based on the shame of petty people who fear losing cultural approbation due to a personal or familial connection to the non-normative.

Harry’s first trip to London as a wizard also bears traits similar to a queer coming-of-age tale. The modern rise of gay identity and community is historically linked to the after-effects of World Wars I and II, as queer English and American GIs returned from battle and relocated to large metropolitan areas rather than traveling home to their rural roots.<sup>16</sup> Harry must similarly relocate from the banal conformity represented by suburbia in Little Whinging to the more cosmopolitan and hospitable yet ultimately clandestine world of magical London. That the wizards’ London lies openly “hidden” from Muggle eyes resembles the ways in which queer establishments can likewise be invisible to straight eyes oblivious to their presence. When Harry asks Hagrid if they can purchase his school supplies in London, Hagrid succinctly replies “If yeh know where to go” (*SS* 67). Hagrid introduces Harry to a new world in which he can live openly as a wizard, and this experience parallels the experience of many homosexuals who are introduced to gay life by a more knowledgeable guide.

Yet another correspondence between wizardry and queerness lies in Harry’s knowledge of the necessity of passing—of appearing to be exactly the opposite of who he is in order to survive in a discriminatory environment. Passing as heterosexual entails remaining in—or, when necessary, returning to—the silence and seclusion of the closet, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes: “‘Closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence” (3). Harry at times agrees to such performances of silence so that he can pass as a Muggle and thus avoid conflict in the Dursley household. Prior to Aunt Marge’s visit to the Dursleys, Harry promises to behave in front of her: “I’ll act like a Mug[gle]—like I’m normal and everything” (*PA* 21). Harry’s concession here—his agreement to deny his identity as a wizard for the sake of familial peace—is doubtlessly familiar, in concept if not in practice, to any queer reader who has been forced to pass as heterosexual in certain situations.

If wizardry allows Harry the opportunity to resist normativity, it is imperative to realize that it permits him merely to resist Muggle normativity but not the equally repressive force of wizarding normativity. That is to say, Muggles and Wizards may define normativity differently in relation to magic, but they agree tacitly on the sexual behaviors constitutive of cultural normalcy. Thus, queer readings of Harry’s coming out as a wizard must remain figurative and depend on queer readers bringing their own metatextual knowledge to the text to make the parallels. In the end, wizards are only queer magically; they are



never queer sexually. Queer readers can interpret wizardry itself as queer, but the force of heteronormativity in the *Potter* books ultimately truncates the meaning of the queer within the fantastic world of the series.

A more disturbing queer figuration in the *Harry Potter* series is the parallel between werewolves and gay men due to their shared status as marginalized figures. Werewolves serve as a figure for queerness in that families must readjust their relationships and expectations of one another when a member becomes a werewolf, as families must likewise do when a loved one comes out of the closet as homosexual. After Bill Weasley is bitten by a werewolf during the climactic fight of *Half-Blood Prince*, the Weasleys rally around their fallen son, but Mrs. Weasley expects that his fiancée, Fleur Delacour, will break their engagement—“and he was g-going to be married!” (*H-BP* 622). These words suggest that it is culturally anticipated that werewolves will be rejected even by their loved ones. Fleur angrily rejects Mrs. Weasley’s claim—“It would take more zan a werewolf to stop Bill loving me!” (*H-BP* 623)—but the possibility of fractured familial relationships looms as large for textual lycanthropes as it does for metatextual queers.<sup>17</sup> Fleur bravely stands by Bill, despite the reasonable fear that he might unwittingly attack her and infect her with lycanthropy, but the Weasleys’ expectation that she will abandon Bill suggests that her fidelity to him is an anomalous instance of a person not rejecting a loved one with lycanthropy.

The Weasleys represent a family confronting and overcoming the prejudices against incorporating a potential werewolf into the family, but when Remus Lupin describes the bigotry that he faces as a werewolf, especially in regard to finding employment, the connections between textual lycanthropy and metatextual queerness are striking: “[Dumbledore] let me into Hogwarts as a boy, and he gave me a job when I have been shunned all my adult life, unable to find paid work because of what I am” (*PA* 356). Lupophobia and homophobia are thus similarly founded upon a fear of the Other, and these prejudices create an atmosphere of distrust and loathing that inhibits chances for gainful employment. Bill and Remus thus appear to serve as sympathetic and likeable representations of the Other, who model that queers should not be shunned, despite the overarching cultural prejudices against them.

If werewolves thus serve as a queer figure within the world of the *Harry Potter* books, it becomes distressingly apparent that they must then also serve as figures of pederasty and child sexual abuse. Certainly, the texts invite a link between lycanthropic and homosexual hysteria surrounding the employment of werewolves and queers in schools, as Lupin describes: “[Parents] will not want a werewolf teaching their children, Harry. And after last night, I see their point. I could have bitten any of you. . . . That must never happen again” (*PA* 423). Because this sympathetic figure suffers a life of seclusion due to circumstances beyond his control, one might expect Lupin to condemn lupophobia as irrational and baseless discrimination; on the contrary, the reader sees that the prejudices against werewolves are neither hysterical nor unfounded. Be-

cause Lupin cannot control his lupine behavior, his animalistic queerness thus becomes a very real threat to the children of Hogwarts, as he himself realizes prior to removing himself from contact with them.

From the initial congruency between werewolves and queers, the parallels slip increasingly into the realm of pederasty rather than of homosexuality. Lupin's words highlight his inability to control his desires, and these desires ultimately threaten the children of Hogwarts with lycanthropic infection, if not death. Lupin is presented as a good werewolf who strives to control his dark urges to harm others; in contrast, Fenrir Greyback delights in the pederastic pleasures of preying on children:

Greyback grinned, showing pointed teeth. Blood trickled down his chin and he licked his lips slowly, obscenely.

"But you know how much I like kids, Dumbledore." (*H-BP* 593)

After Voldemort himself, Greyback is perhaps the most frightening of Rowling's villains, and a large measure of his horror is due to his obscene delight in preying upon children. Whether reading werewolves as queers or as pederasts, the failure of werewolves to serve as suitable figures of queerness arises in the fact that lycanthropy cannot be imagined as a positive force; families may rally around their afflicted members, but they would not choose to have a werewolf in their households.<sup>18</sup> Beyond the congruency between werewolves and queers, lycanthropy in the *Harry Potter* series also bears the markers of AIDS, in that it is a "disease" transmitted through the exchange of bodily fluids. Given the diseased nature of lycanthropes in the texts, the metaphor between werewolves and gay men marks all queers as quite literally sick.

Given the books' avowed interest in resisting cultural normativity, the ways in which heteronormativity nonetheless contains queer readings points to its crushing ideological weight. Queer figures are subsumed by the texts' construction of wizarding heteronormativity, and thus the fantastic becomes infected with the banal. In a similar manner, heterosexual female and male characters are likewise thwarted by the cultural logic of heteronormativity, especially in regard to the ways in which gendered normativity constructs Harry's masculine heroism.

## **Marginalizing Women in the "Post-Feminist" Wizarding World**

At a superficial level, the *Harry Potter* books can be seen as breaking with some of the traditional, male-dominated aspects of the boys' school story and queering the genre's basic tenets. For example, Hogwarts is coeducational and employs women in positions of power, and one of the most important characters in the books is a girl, Hermione. In contrast to the absence of LGBT people in *Harry Potter*, female characters occupy positions of power at Hogwarts and throughout the wizarding community. Minerva McGonagall serves as Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts, and several department heads at the

Ministry of Magic are women, including Amelia Bones (*OP* 123) and Griselda Marchbanks (*OP* 308, 707). Millicent Bagnold served as a previous Minister of Magic (*OP* 93), and Dilys Derwent was a previous Headmistress at Hogwarts (*OP* 485). Likewise, female characters play vital roles in the development of the plots. As Andrew Blake contends, “Hermione is arguably the second-most important character in the stories” (39), and even the hated and “toad-like” Dolores Umbridge affects the plot of *Order of the Phoenix* in important ways, managing to undermine Dumbledore’s authority at Hogwarts more successfully than any of his male enemies. The danger of this veneer of gender equity is that it can be taken as proof that the books are not sexist and that it masks the extent to which women’s agency in the books is muted. A more sensible view is that Rowling updates the canonical boys’ school story for the turn of the twenty-first century. In a sense, this “post-feminist” wizarding world serves as a place in which gender is no longer an issue that needs much attention; unfortunately, a closer look at the female characters reveals that their agency is limited in several traditional ways.

Women’s roles are subjugated to masculinity in the *Potter* books in that the gender roles in the three main social institutions—government (the Ministry of Magic), school (Hogwarts), and family (the Dursleys and the Weasleys)—are blatantly traditional. Although women hold positions of power in the Ministry of Magic and at Hogwarts, the top positions in each institution are currently held by men and even the British prime minister, who makes a cameo appearance in *Half-Blood Prince*, is male. Despite Dilys Derwent’s reign as Headmistress of Hogwarts, her tenure in this overwhelmingly masculine role appears to be an exception to the predominant rule that Heads of Hogwarts be male, as evidenced by the numerous men who have served in this position: Armando Dippet, Everard, Fortescue, Phineas Nigellus, and, of course, Albus Dumbledore. The pattern of traditional gender roles is even more pronounced in the two families with whom Harry spends his time, as both of the husbands/fathers are the breadwinners (Vernon Dursley and Arthur Weasley) and both of the mothers (Petunia Dursley and Molly Weasley) are the primary caretakers. Indeed, Katherine Grimes argues that Molly Weasley “is very much the prototypical mother” (96), who inhabits the role of surrogate mother for Harry. In contrast to her husband, who spends most of his time at the Ministry of Magic or on Ministry business, Molly tends to the domestic front by cooking, worrying, scolding, and knitting Christmas jumpers.

The gender roles of the *Harry Potter* novels are also problematic in their stereotypical physical descriptions of women. Of course, many of the characters—including the males—are essentially caricatures whose physical attributes signal their internal attributes. Dumbledore’s impressive height, his long grayish beard, and his half-moon spectacles signal his wisdom and stature. The ultimately foolish Cornelius Fudge, who is too concerned with politics in his role as Minister of Magic to notice Voldemort’s resurgence, is short, rather round, and wears an absurd bowler hat. Professor Snape’s oily nature and

propensity for favoritism is signaled by his dark, greasy hair. In respect to the female characters, McGonagall's severe personality and concern for fairness is signaled by her tall, thin, almost-spinster-like appearance. These stereotypical descriptors of female appearance are problematically connected to regressive constructions of feminine beauty and ugliness, which are notably absent from male physiognomic descriptions. For example, Dolores Umbridge is presented much like her boss (Fudge) as small and rather round. A number of pointed references stress Umbridge's unattractiveness, labeling her "toad-like" and poking fun at her absurd pink ribbons; however, Fudge is never degraded in a like manner due to his physical attributes. Hermione is also judged by her appearance. On the one hand, she is taunted by Draco Malfoy and other Slytherins because of her prominent front teeth; on the other hand, she is admired (in a fairly Platonic way) by Harry when she appears as Viktor Krum's date at the Yule Ball in *Goblet of Fire* because of her periwinkle dress robes, her newly styled hair, and her magically proportioned teeth. As Mendlesohn points out, the attention that Hermione receives on this occasion is "predicated first on the magical equivalent of plastic surgery . . . and second, on the attention paid to her by the only figure presented as more exciting than Potter, Viktor Krum the Quidditch player" (174–75). It should be noted that Harry is also judged by his physical appearance both positively and negatively, and in *Half-Blood Prince* Harry is surprised to find himself the object of many young women's romantic desires. In contrast to Hermione's obvious artifice in changing her appearance, Harry's sudden attractiveness occurs through no effort of his own. As Hermione explains to him, the Ministry of Magic's sudden adoption of him as "the chosen one" who will defeat Lord Voldemort gives him a celebrity that is part of his attraction, but she also notes that Harry has "never been more fanciable" because he has "grown about a foot over the summer" (*H-BP* 219).

The gender roles in the *Potter* novels are also problematic when women are presented as only taking action within the purview of men, and their actions are depicted as largely irrelevant or unreasonable when they step outside that authority. The most obvious example of this pattern is Hermione, whose considerable talents are nearly always used in the service of Harry's quest. Hermione's ability to master advanced magic and her considerable talent for translating that knowledge into practical powers contrasts with Harry's innate talents: he cannot match Hermione's knowledge and use of magic except in the defensive arts, and his main qualification for his quest seems to be his inherent sense of nerve, which allows him to take direct action when needed. As Alicia Willson-Metzger and David Metzger observe, "Harry . . . has a different combination of intelligences from Hermione, an amalgam that at once compliments and surpasses her gifts" (58). This combination of innate talent and adolescent bravado leads him both to childish acts of rashness and to impressive acts of heroism. Of course, both characters mature during their years at Hogwarts through their many adventures together, and Hermione succeeds somewhat in her attempts to encourage Ron and Harry to act less rashly. She also learns

herself that it may be important to break rules when a higher purpose must be achieved. However, as Suman Gupta observes, when Hermione develops her own agenda—tackling the issue of house-elf slavery—every other character treats her cause as an eccentricity (120).

A similar pattern of women working within the purview of men can be seen with McGonagall, who acts as Dumbledore's second-in-command at Hogwarts, and Umbridge, who acts as Fudge's agent. McGonagall, the most respected figure at Hogwarts after Dumbledore, acts decisively within the authority that Dumbledore delegates to her as his Deputy Headmistress, as Head of Gryffindor House, and as a member of the Order of the Phoenix. Dumbledore treats McGonagall respectfully, but she consistently defers to his judgment. Even when she expresses grave concerns about his choices, her deference to his wisdom establishes his authority for readers. For example, in the first chapter of *Sorcerer's Stone*, a conversation between McGonagall and Dumbledore provides readers with important background information central to the plot: Voldemort killed Harry's parents but was mysteriously vanquished when he tried to kill the infant Harry. In this conversation, McGonagall reveals that Dumbledore is the only wizard who intimidates Voldemort and that he is too "noble" to use the dark powers essential to Voldemort's reign of terror (SS 11). After expressing her concerns about Dumbledore's plan to leave Harry in the care of the Dursleys—"Dumbledore—you can't. I've been watching them all day. You couldn't find two people who are less like us" (SS 13)—McGonagall then concedes the wisdom of his plan: "Professor McGonagall opened her mouth, changed her mind, swallowed, and then said, 'Yes—yes, you're right of course'" (SS 13–14). After such scenes as these, McGonagall finally acts on her own authority when Dumbledore is murdered at the end of *Half-Blood Prince* and she assumes the Headship of Hogwarts. The leadership style she exhibits in this crisis is quite different than Dumbledore's. Rather than issuing decisive orders as Dumbledore often does, McGonagall calls her colleagues together and consults with them about their course of action. While we might admire McGonagall's more collaborative leadership style (particularly in comparison to Dumbledore's somewhat highhanded and often secretive demeanor), the point is that we do not see much of McGonagall's leadership ability on its own terms.

The presentation of Dolores Umbridge similarly showcases the limitations of agency in regard to female characters. Rowling is particularly adept at creating minor villains who *Potter* readers (ourselves included) love to hate, and readers are given many reasons to dislike Umbridge, including her toad-like appearance, her incompetence as a teacher, her favoritism amongst students, and her hatred of Harry. Further, Umbridge is portrayed as exceeding her authority and any sort of moral compass by ordering Dementors to attack Harry, as well as by using an illegal curse to coerce information from him. She is also a thoroughly stupid character who is duped by children and who is so irrationally biased against half-humans and oblivious to her surroundings that she insults and is captured by centaurs, and finally must be rescued by a man

(Dumbledore). What is disturbing about the depiction of Umbridge's character is that she is one of the few women who acts in a way that directly affects the plot of the books, and these independent actions are cast as outside the bounds of civilized behavior. Thus, if we see McGonagall and Umbridge as foils of one another, it becomes apparent that McGonagall is a "good" woman who follows her male superior's orders while Umbridge is a "bad" woman in large part because she acts according to her personal desires. In the final analysis, the actions of both women are presented as largely ineffective without sufficient masculine guidance. In these ways, Rowling's engendering of the school story does little to challenge the problematic binary between valorized masculinity and subjugated femininity.

### **Heteronormative Heroism and Marginalizing Masculinity in the School Story**

Beyond its erasure of queer sexuality and its depiction of secondary femininity, the *Potter* tales are also an important site for understanding how heteronormative masculinity harms straight men (despite their usual privileges in Western culture). In essence, Harry's heteronormative and heroic masculinity extends beyond his sexual attraction to the opposite sex into a narrow version of masculinity that limits his relationships with male characters in the books as well—most notably, with Ron Weasley, Sirius Black, and Albus Dumbledore. Heteronormative masculinity, as it operates in the *Harry Potter* books, dictates that there can only be one hero—Harry—on whom the fate of the wizarding world rests. To achieve such heroic status, Harry must be free of any taint of sexual queerness and his masculinity must be unchallenged by any character other than his ultimate nemesis, Voldemort.

Ron establishes both aspects of Harry's heroic masculinity. As Harry's sidekick, Ron's masculinity must be secondary to the hero's. Ron is Tonto to Harry's Lone Ranger, Robin to his Batman, and thus Ron can never match Harry in terms of his accomplishments, whether they be sexual, intellectual, athletic, or heroic. Ron's secondary status in relation to Harry is established through his always tenuous masculinity, despite the fact that he is physically larger and more developed (as evidenced by his moustache) than Harry. For example, in *Goblet of Fire* Ron's Yule Ball clothes effeminize him: "There was just no getting around the fact that his robes looked more like a dress than anything else" (*GF* 411). Ron is sexually naïve, and his failures in terms of his sexual development are apparent throughout the series.<sup>19</sup> He only begins dating Lavender Brown after his sister Ginny derides him for his lack of sexual experience: "Just because *he's* never snogged anyone in his life, just because the best kiss *he's* ever had is from Aunt Muriel" (*H-BP* 287). Ginny humiliates Ron such that he soon begins energetically, if somewhat unenthusiastically, dating Lavender Brown. Earlier, when he refuses to dance with his date Padma at the Yule Ball, the reader sees that Ron's sexuality is stunted:

“Are you going to ask me to dance at all?” Padma asked him.  
“No,” said Ron, still glaring after Hermione. (*GF* 423)

Ron refuses to dance with Padma because he envies Viktor Krum, who is dating Hermione. But it seems likewise possible that Ron’s affections for Hermione could be directed to Viktor himself. Ron is certainly effeminized when he conspires to get Viktor’s autograph: “Ron hovered behind the bookshelves for a while, watching Krum, debating in whispers with Harry whether he should ask for an autograph—but then Ron realized that six or seven girls were lurking in the next row of books, debating exactly the same thing, and he lost his enthusiasm for the idea” (*GF* 373). Although Harry is also depicted as fairly naïve about relationships with the opposite sex, he is not effeminized to the extent that Ron is, nor is he ever depicted as particularly impressed by Krum: as the heteronormative hero of the series, Harry need not admire Krum, as he is ultimately Krum’s superior (as evidenced by his defeating Krum in the Tri-Wizard Tournament).<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Ron’s admiration for Krum is also linked to his own failures as a Quidditch player. Although he improves dramatically at the sport throughout his years at Hogwarts, to the extent that the Slytherins’ sarcastic declaration of “Weasley is our king” metamorphoses into the Gryffindors’ sincere homage to his abilities, Harry’s natural talents in the game always outshine his. It is surely not coincidental that Ron becomes the momentary “king” of Quidditch in a game in which Harry does not participate (*OP* 702).

While Ron’s primary attachments are based on his asexual yet deep friendship with Harry, no inkling of a queer relationship between Ron and Harry emerges despite the homosocial arrangements of life in the dormitories. Clark explains that even though children’s literature “generally steers clear of sex,” homoeroticism emerges in some school stories without much ado and is treated as “simply a stage in adolescence” (216). Romantic friendships, a cultural construction of same-sex attachment prevalent in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century England and America, afforded men and women a culturally sanctioned opportunity to participate in deep emotional relationships between members of the same sex with the expectation that these relationships were passing phases in a trajectory toward heterosexual marriage; such relationships appear within the traditional parameters of the school story.<sup>21</sup> This loss of homosocial innocence in the school story serves as yet another instance of the emergence of the concept of heterosexuality (as something distinct from and superior to homosexuality) that Foucault, Sedgwick, and Katz document as emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Harry’s heteronormative heroism is linked to his maturation into an increasingly solitary hero. For example, in the two major challenges that he faces as a first-year student at Hogwarts, he works in partnership with Ron and Hermione. When Hermione is trapped by a mountain troll in the girls’ bathroom, Ron and Harry work together to save her, and Ron casts the spell that ultimately disables

the troll. Similarly, in the climax of *Sorcerer's Stone*, Ron, Hermione, and Harry work collaboratively. Although in the end Harry faces Voldemort alone, he could not reach this confrontation without both Ron's skill at chess and Hermione's knowledge of obscure magical plants and skill with logic problems. Indeed, in his adjudication of the House Cup competition, Dumbledore acknowledges this collaboration when he awards Ron and Hermione nearly the same points that he awards Harry for their roles in saving the Sorcerer's Stone. However, as Harry matures, this pattern changes; as Andrew Blake notes, "in the subsequent books Harry's heroism grows, while Ron's and Hermione's roles in the stories diminish in scope" (41).

Harry's growth as a heteronormative hero also requires the attenuation or death of the male characters who might rival the solitary masculinity required for his heroic status. Mendlesohn observes that in the early books, "Harry is gathering around himself a coterie of adult protectors and champions including Dumbledore, Snape, Black, and Lupin, who seem to obviate the need for Harry to do anything" (176); however, this collection of protectors also bears the potential to emasculate him. Harry's move toward solitary hero status is solidified in the fifth and sixth books, when two of these adults—Sirius Black and Albus Dumbledore—are eliminated. After his escape from the wizard prison Azkaban, Black becomes, as Mary Pharr argues, "a direct link to the past Harry cannot remember himself." He serves as a second mentor who is less imposing than Dumbledore because Black "is the one [Harry] consults when he worries that his problems are too foolish for Dumbledore's notice" (61). Indeed, Black cuts a rather dashing figure in the fourth and fifth books—described as very handsome before his unjust incarceration and then as a daring and reckless fugitive in *Goblet of Fire* and *Order of the Phoenix*. However, Black's superior knowledge, dueling skill, and willingness to take risks dictate that he must be dispatched so that Harry can emerge as the only wizard/man capable of facing Voldemort in the end. Black dies in the battle scene near the end of *Order of the Phoenix* because his masculinity potentially overshadows Harry's.

If Black must be killed because he is a man of greater action and sexual attraction than Harry, Dumbledore's fate is likewise sealed because he outshines Harry on all other fronts. Indeed, throughout the books Harry's relationship with Dumbledore is effeminizing. Dumbledore reminds the reader too much that Harry is not yet sufficiently wise, heroic, or strong to conquer Voldemort. It is repeated throughout the series that Dumbledore is the only man whom Voldemort ever feared, and it is simply untenable for Harry to remain in Dumbledore's shadow. Heteronormative heroism, as formulated in the narrative, demands an alpha male—the single and solitary male figure for the reader to respect above all others—and Harry cannot achieve this status with Dumbledore standing beside him.

As the books progress, it is revealed that Harry alone is fated to kill or be killed by Voldemort, and thus Harry's relationship with Dumbledore becomes increasingly problematic. Rowling goes to extraordinary lengths in the early



books to keep Dumbledore from confronting Voldemort. He is absent from Hogwarts in the crucial scenes of the first two books when Harry faces Voldemort, who in his weakened state would be no match for a wizard of Dumbledore's stature. In these scenes, Dumbledore provides Harry with support from a distance, such as knowledge of how the Mirror of Erised works and delivering the sorting hat from which Harry draws Gryffindor's sword to slay the basilisk. To set up Harry's next encounter with Voldemort, near the end of *Goblet of Fire*, Rowling creates the elaborate plot device of the Tri-Wizard Tournament and the clever detail of portkeys to ensure that Harry (but not Dumbledore) will be present at Voldemort's physical rebirth. The pattern changes in the fifth book when Dumbledore appears at the zenith of his power and influence, serving as the unquestioned leader of the Order of the Phoenix and performing amazing feats of magic when he comes to Harry's rescue and engages in a magical duel with Voldemort from which Voldemort ultimately retreats.

This direct encounter between Dumbledore and Voldemort further feminizes Harry and underlines the need for Dumbledore's removal if Harry is to stand alone as the ultimate hero of the series. Harry describes himself as "Dumbledore's man through and through" (*HP* 649), and these lines demonstrate Harry's allegiance to Dumbledore, whether living or dead. These words also highlight that Harry is not yet his own man, that he must somehow free himself from Dumbledore's shadow. In *Half-Blood Prince* Rowling prepares the reader for Dumbledore's death and Harry's ascension to the role of alpha-male hero by hinting at Dumbledore's vulnerability, by presenting Dumbledore as willing to sacrifice himself to eliminate Voldemort, and by Dumbledore taking Harry on as a helper in a dangerous task. Dumbledore's blackened hand, which refuses magical remedies, signals his vulnerability, and he explains to Harry that the injury occurred when he destroyed one of Voldemort's horcruxes (objects to which Voldemort transferred parts of his soul to become immortal), commenting, "a withered hand does not seem an unreasonable exchange for a seventh of Voldemort's soul" (*H-BP* 503). In the end, heteronormative heroism demands Dumbledore's death. The weight of the mythic hero compresses and limits narrative possibility to such an extent that Dumbledore's demise should surprise no one. In the creation of Harry Potter as cultural hero, heteronormative heroism kills, and Albus Dumbledore is the latest and most striking example of its penchant for the blood of the good and powerful in the service of creating action heroes.

The *Harry Potter* series has not (at least in the first six books) shown us an emerging hero who learns anything about the operation of sexism and heterosexism in his world. Indeed, the effects of heteronormative heroism in the *Harry Potter* books are numerous and disturbing: non-normative sexual identities are completely absent, possible queer-affirming readings are problematized, women and girls are presented in subservient and sexualized roles, and Harry's own character is forced into a narrow action-hero role that requires the death or removal of any competitors. As we have mentioned, Blake's posi-

tion is that, because Harry encourages children to read, he must be seen as a hero. However, a closer reading is not only beneficial but necessary, especially in light of some critics' insistence on reading Harry's rather simplistic hero status in an unquestioningly positive light. For example, Terri Doughty touts Harry's version of heroism as wholly positive:

By celebrating male heroism at a moment when popular culture fears male violence, indeed, when boys are seen as killers, Rowling has tapped into a kind of collective unconscious need to be reminded that boys have a path toward maturity to follow, and that they can indeed make it, both with help and on their own. As a mother of a son, I, too, find Harry's adventures reassuring. (257)

While we agree that there is much that is laudable in the *Potter* series, Doughty's praise of Harry as a model hero puzzles us, as she notes earlier in her piece that one reason that the books appeal to boys is that they "do not problematize masculinity" (253). Perhaps Doughty believes that problematizing masculinity is not in the best interests of her son and of other readers of the *Harry Potter* books, but as men whose sexual identities are too often marginalized and pathologized by dominant culture and as scholars deeply concerned about the negative effects of heteronormativity on society, we believe that sorting out the effects of heteronormative heroism in the *Potter* series and other texts is critical. And as fans of the *Potter* series, we are disappointed that heteronormative heroism so limits Harry's development as a hero that the premature death of one of our favorite characters, Albus Dumbledore, was a foregone conclusion.

Are the *Harry Potter* books particularly egregious or insidious cases of upholding gendered and sexual normativity? One can certainly name many texts with more problematic constructions of gender and sexuality. Yet the case of *Harry Potter* is nonetheless instructive in analyzing the ideological effects of heteronormativity, in that these texts that trumpet resistance to normativity are actually mired in the very normativity they promise to escape. The genre of the school story is queered on a surface level, but on a surface level only, and thus once again heteronormativity banishes any real subversion of its message.

## Notes

1. For studies of *Harry Potter* and the school story tradition, see Rollin, Smith, and Steege.

2. For theoretical studies of post-feminism, see Rosenfelt and Stacey, as well as Modleski.

3. Analyses of gender roles in the *Harry Potter* series include the studies of Heilman, Dresang, and Mendlesohn.

4. We focus on the gendered intersection of the school story and the hero story in this article, but *Harry Potter* plays with a range of generic forms, including *bildungsroman* (Byam), melodrama (Tucker), gothic (Robertson), and fantasy (Saric). It is beyond the

scope of this article to address the gendered dimensions of these many genres, yet to some extent the ideological weight of most every genre leans toward the heteronormative.

5. Campbellian analyses of the *Harry Potter* series include the works of Blake, Grimes, Nikolajeva, Pharr, and Polk.

6. An instance of overt homophobia occurs near the beginning of *Order of the Phoenix* when Harry and his cousin Dudley are arguing and insulting each other. As Dudley becomes increasingly desperate to exert verbal dominance over Harry, he taunts Harry for crying out during the nightmares in which Harry relives Voldemort's murder of Cedric Diggory: "Dudley gave a harsh bark of laughter and then adopted a high-pitched, whimpering voice. 'Don't kill Cedric! Don't kill Cedric!' Who's Cedric—your boyfriend?" (15). Since Dudley, one of the most unappealing characters in the books, voices this homophobic jibe, it is clear that the books do not explicitly endorse homophobia.

7. In terms of a critical lexicon for discussing homosexuality, we use *homosexual* to refer to sexual desires and acts between two people of the same biological sex and *queer* more generally to indicate disruptions to culturally gendered normativity. Thus, one can be queer without being homosexual; likewise, one can be homosexual without being queer, if a social and ideological environment does not create seemingly inevitable links between same-sex desire and cultural transgression. For example, male homosexuality was not necessarily queer in classical Greece, as it did not always disrupt social and ideological constructions of male normativity. See K. J. Dover.

8. In the interests of economy, we refer to each of the *Harry Potter* books with the following shortened titles: *Sorcerer's Stone* (SS), *Chamber of Secrets* (CS), *Prisoner of Azkaban* (PA), *Goblet of Fire* (GF), *Order of the Phoenix* (OP), and *Half-Blood Prince* (H-BP). All references are to the American versions of the books.

9. One could argue that some of Rowling's characters are asexual, in that they are not depicted in sexual or amatory relationships of any kind. If so, the asexuality of these characters does little to upset prevailing codes of heteronormativity.

10. Readers are invited to see Angelina Johnson and Lee Jordan as Anglo-African because of their dreadlocks, and Harry's first love interest, Cho Chang, is marked as Asian by her name and her dark hair. Of course, the inclusion of these minor characters of color among hundreds of other characters appears to be little more than tokenism, and it does little to offset the overwhelming whiteness of the books.

11. Mary Elliot notes the similarity between W. E. B. DuBois's concept of the double consciousness of black people (who are always aware of how they are seen through the lens of whiteness) and the somewhat similar awareness of LGBT people (who are always aware of how they are seen through heteronormativity) (696). Like Elliot, we recognize that such a double consciousness can operate as a force to make marginalized people internalize the views of their oppressors. However, when DuBois coined the term *double consciousness* in *The Souls of Black Folk*, he referred to it as a gift, as something that gives black people an extra insight into how culture works. Our position is that both perspectives on double consciousness are important. For example, in our discussion of possible queer interpretations of the *Harry Potter* books, we illustrate how queer perspectives and experiences open readings that might not be apparent to other readers, but we do so in the service of exposing the ways in which heteronormative stereotypes ultimately alienate some readers.

12. See the studies of Beach and Willner, Black, Kooy, and Wood and Quackenbush.
13. For studies of Rowling's names, see Algeo and Randall.
14. It is possible that Rowling is unfamiliar with the connections between *Stonewall* and American gay history, but the word bears queer connotations in the United Kingdom as well. For example, see the Web site [stonewall.org.uk](http://stonewall.org.uk), one of the United Kingdom's most popular LGBT Web sites.
15. Certainly the threat of magic is used against the Dursleys several times as a means of curbing their bad behavior toward Harry. For example, at the end of *Sorcerer's Stone*, Harry surprises his friends by smiling at the prospect of returning to them for the summer: "They don't know we're not allowed to use magic at home. I'm going to have a lot of fun with Dudley this summer" (SS 309).
16. For a brief overview of these historical conditions, see Marcus (19–70) and Spencer (347–51).
17. Readers are invited to consider both disfigurement and the possibility of Bill's lycanthropy as possible reasons for estrangement from his family and from his fiancée. However, clear statements by Mrs. Weasley and Fleur (*H-BP* 622) sweep aside the possibility of disfigurement as a basis for estrangement. No such clear statements indicate that becoming a werewolf is inconsequential.
18. A possible exception to this rule is Tonks, who loves Remus (*H-BP* 624). Much like the Weasleys' rallying around Bill, however, it seems unlikely that Tonks would *prefer* for Remus to remain a werewolf. Lycanthropy can never be appreciated as a good of its own accord in the *Potter* world, which degrades it as a suitable figure of queerness.
19. Certainly Harry is also presented as socially awkward and sexually inexperienced, but not to the extent that Ron is. For example, both boys are rejected by the girls they initially ask to the Yule Ball. However, Harry steels himself to ask his potential date, Cho Chang, directly, and she seems genuinely disappointed that she already has a date. In contrast, Ron blurts out an invitation to the unapproachable Fleur Delacour, who, Ron says, "looked at me like I was a sea slug or something. Didn't even answer. And then—I dunno—I just sort of came to my senses and ran for it" (*GF* 399). Further, it is Harry who ultimately secures dates for both himself and Ron.
20. Even when Ron ostensibly triumphs over Harry, as when he is selected as Prefect, we learn later that Dumbledore chose Ron not because he was the better candidate for the position but because Dumbledore did not want to overload the already taxed Harry with additional responsibilities (*OP* 844).
21. For example, see Tribunella for a study of homosociality and muted homosexuality in John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*. For historical studies of romantic friendships, see Katz (*Love Stories*) and Rupp. The after-effects of such a school-based romantic friendship can be seen in the relationship between Charles and Sebastian in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, when Cara cautions: "I know of these romantic friendships of the English and the Germans. They are not Latin. I think they are very good if they do not go on too long" (101). Her words suggest that same-sex romantic friendships are acceptable as a passing phase in a boy's adolescence during his school years. See Pugh for a study of romantic friendship in *Brideshead Revisited*.

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