



Harry Potter and the Social Construct. Does Gender-Swap Fanfiction Show Us That We Need to Re-consider Gender Within Children's Literature?

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Abstract

In this paper I look at how gender is performed in fanfiction, specifically in gender-swap stories within the Harry Potter fandom. Fanfiction is not constrained by any editorial oversight, and there are no financial considerations attached to either reading or writing it, two facts which make it a unique and essential part of the discourse surrounding children's literature. Anyone can write and read it, and there are very few narrative constraints, both of which make the characters and the worlds open to almost infinite types of adaptation. Rather than being closed off within a printed text, the characters take on an elasticity which allows them to exist in worlds, relationships and stories outside their source material. This narrative freedom means fan fictions act not just as textual adaptations, but also social commentaries, narrative sites which are plastic enough to allow writers to project themselves and their opinions onto pre-existing and familiar characters. This elasticity and textual fluidity lends itself very well to a study of contemporary performances of gender, which in turn reveals how the offline publishing market's adherence to a patriarchal hegemony continues to produce a gender imbalance in terms of both subject and author privilege, something which doesn't adequately reflect either the desires or the reading habits of contemporary children and young adults.

Keywords Fanfiction · Gender · Intertextuality · Slash · Gender-swap · Role-play

Article

'Why are all your books about girls? Girls are boring. You should write about boys; they can do way more cool stuff.' Silas, Yr 6.

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Silas attends a primary school in North London, he sits on the top table for literacy, and his teacher assures me he is one of her best readers. Why then is he asking me this? Is he particularly forcefully gendered, or is this a symptom of a wider trend? There could be any number of reasons, but, for our purposes, and given that he addressed this comment to me, in my capacity as an author visiting his school, I'm going to assume that Silas's gender-bias derives in some way from his exposure to literature.

A survey conducted at Florida State University found that in 6000 children's books published between 1900 and 2000, male characters were represented nearly twice as often as females and were 1.6 times more likely to be the central character. This reflected an overall trend of 'a symbolic annihilation of female characters', which, Janice McCabe pointed out, 'reinforce[d], legitimise[d], and reproduce[d] a patriarchal gender system' (McCabe et al., 2011). This is the case even though traditionally the principal purchasers of children's literature (CL) have been primary carers and teachers, both of which are groups largely dominated by women. In addition, the majority of CL authors are women, and the CL publishing industry, unlike its adult equivalent, has historically been controlled by women. A recent survey of US publishers in fact put the figure at 78% cis-women (Leeandlow Books, 2016). However, a more recent survey of hardback books published in the US suggests something rather different. In the first six months of 2014, 65% of main characters in YA novels (aimed at 12–18 year olds) were female, which made them 43% more common than male protagonists (Cox, 2020–21).

As a male author writing predominantly female characters for a middle-grade and YA audience (*A pig Called Heather*, *The Return of a pig Called Heather*, and *Heather's Piglets*) (Oulton, 2014a, b, 2015), this is of particular interest to me. Why does Silas think there are no female characters worthy of his attention, that is, who are doing 'cool stuff'? What does this tell us about the way gender is being performed in the middle-grade and YA markets?

It is likely that Silas's strongly gendered views are in part created by the books which are available to him, but also by the ones he chooses to access. Certainly the middle-grade readers to whom I gave drafts of my books suggested I 'should not have a girl's name in the title', and a similar observation was made by Robert Lipstye writing in the New York Times in 2011: 'It's a cliché but mostly true that while teenage girls will read books about boys, teenage boys will rarely read books with predominately female characters' (Lipsyte, 2011). That said, Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* (2008) is arguably the most prominent of YA action heroes within the last twenty years and the commercial success of both books and films suggests they were accessed by both genders. Katniss is unusual because she triumphs in the Hunger Games not just by being gendered as a man (athletic, strong, good with weapons), but by combining that with more traditionally female gender roles such as supporting other women, mothering the character of Rue, nursing Peeta, and creating a community/support network within the arena. In the light of Butler's work on gender as a performative construct (Butler, 1990), it is interesting that the most feminine or gendered trait of all, the ability/desire to fall in love, is only present when she quite literally 'performs' it by

pretending to love Peeta. This does ask a larger question: Is it possible to re-gender characters in YA novels, or will they always be defined by their assigned sex?

In this article I will attempt to answer that question by looking at gender as it is performed in fan fiction (FF), and specifically by looking at the mini-genre of Harry Potter-based gender-swap stories. In her book *Radical Children's Literature*, Kimberley Reynolds identifies FF as a 'major transformation of Children's Literature'. She hypothesises that not only will it be the next major development in publishing, but that in due course it will be so prevalent that all the 'existing work for children written by adults will have to be relabelled' (Reynolds, 2007, p. 180).

For the purposes of this article, I will use Reynolds' definition of FF: 'Fiction written in response to narratives already in circulation, be these on the page or screen' (Reynolds, 2007, p. 180). To this definition I would add 'and that exists in an online form', despite the fact that FF can certainly exist outside the virtual/online world. Homer wrote it (*The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* being fan fiction versions of classic myths), as did Milton (*Paradise Lost* being biblical FF), and it is usually said to have really taken off in Star Trek fanzines in the 1970s (Hellekson and Busse, 2014). While all of these certainly predate the internet, contemporary FF is entirely online for one very good reason. Online fiction is free. Within the narrative constraints of the format, it is free to write and free to read. It is only by remaining online that it can provide open access while avoiding becoming subject to the sort of market forces (legal or commercial) that would be imposed if it were to move into the realm of conventional publishing. When it moves offline, the relationship between reader and writer becomes transactional and financial. The most famous example of this is the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy which started out as FF based on Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* novels. At that stage it was called *Masters of the Universe* and featured both Bella Swann and Edward Cullen (the principal pairing in *Twilight*), syntagmatically shifted into what FF calls an AU (alternate universe) in that they were both older professionals who had never met, rather than the high school iterations of the source novels. Its massive online success prompted E.L. James to self-publish, a decision which has earned her to date more than \$130 million (Cuccinello, 2017).

When she decided to publish, James (who wrote *Masters of the Universe* under the name 'Snowqueens Icedragon') did what is called in FF 'filing off the serial numbers', meaning she changed the title, renamed the characters, and removed any reference to the original *Twilight* novels to avoid any copyright issues. She also removed it from fansites ('pulling to publish'), at which point it could be argued that the text, despite its origins, ceased to be FF and became straight fiction. De Kosnik takes issue with these actions, arguing that while she would defend FF writers' right to make money from their work, the removal of the references to the source material, and the consequent denial of the intertextual nature of its origins, also removes many of its potential meanings.

Rather than being an interesting play on a set of core story elements and familiar characters, the fan text becomes meaningless, a set of seemingly empty signifiers. (De Kosnik, 2015, p. 120)

This objection seems unnecessarily reductive. I would say that by ‘pulling to publish’, or ‘filing the serial numbers off’, *Fifty Shades of Grey* became not ‘meaningless’, but rather two parallel texts. Doubly meaningful in fact. For readers who were ignorant of its transition, it was a brand-new text which could act as a site/source text for more FF; while for those readers who knew its origins, it existed alongside itself as a ‘purified’ (Nikolajeva, 2005) fan-text, which formed part of the ‘archive’ (Derecho, 2006) surrounding *Twilight*. Building on Derrida, Abigail Derecho sees a source text as the genesis of its own archive; every fan-text, adaptation, sequel and named iteration will form part of the archive surrounding that text, which makes it archontic. This idea of the archontic text is significant in adaptation studies because it provides a site for linked texts which avoids freighted or pejorative words such as ‘derivative’ or ‘appropriative’. Archontic texts are grouped by association rather than by qualitative measure:

...all texts that build on a previously existing text are not lesser than the source text, and they do not violate the boundaries of the source text; rather, they only add to that text’s archive, becoming a part of the archive and expanding it. (Derecho, 2006, p. 64)

The absence of commercial influences is relevant because without the incentive of payment for publication, which would in turn likely involve some sort of market-analysis and editorial direction, FF operates in a completely free market. Free to publish, free to read. For an author, the only external (ie non-personal) incentive to publish is the possibility of receiving ‘kudos’ (once they’ve read a story the reader can ‘add kudos’ if they wish), and tracking the number of hits received. Similarly, for a reader, there is no financial element involved in the transaction. This lack of any commercial value adhering to fan-texts removes both incentive and reward. With nothing to gain from publication there is no reason not to write what you want to write, rather than what the market demands. This freedom, as well as the sense of belonging which is engendered by participation in a fandom, can be very attractive.

I often find that my students are also interested in fandom in one way or another, and their speeches often follow their passions. With its intuitive multimodal, cross-genre, open-source culture, fanfiction is a repository for many potential lessons that I, and other instructors, can use to reinvigorate tired classroom curricula. (Weiler, 2019)

In addition, FF is also currently the only type of CL which affords any writer (regardless of age and gender) the agency to create and publish their own fictions. It provides a ‘safe space’ to explore different sexualities, both in terms of reading and writing.

When teens, predominantly female and LGBTQ+teens, want to explore the ideas surrounding sex, the mainstream media tends only to provide the heteronormative perspective that primarily focuses on male pleasure. But fanfiction is often the gateway to everything the mainstream media doesn’t say. (Rhetorikos, 2018)

This becomes important because given the editorial freedom and the absence of market forces, FF authors can write what they want. They are of course operating within the structural, technological and mechanical constraints of the format dictated by the hosting site, but the editorial content of what they write is theoretically un-fettered. What I will show is that what they want to write tends to reflect what they want to read. Their output therefore should be a good indicator of whether the traditional off-line publishing market is servicing that demand.

Fan Fiction as a Product

Genres are usually defined by content rather than by their consumer or creator (romantic fiction being about romance, historical fiction being about history), with the notable exceptions of chick-lit, autobiography, children's literature, and fan fiction. Children's literature is particularly hard to define, given that while it might be written for children, or about them, it is not written *by* them. FF is similarly complicated. It is clearly fiction, but it is both written by and intended for fans. The nomenclature puts both author and implied reader within the same narrative space. It is impossible to write FF without already having been a reader (or fan), and impossible to read it without already having a degree of intertextual familiarity with what you are about to read. Writer and reader are two inseparable sides of the same fan. As 'fan' can (and must) apply equally to both author and audience, FF represents a constructed binary, but a positive rather than an oppositional one. Fans write stories which are extensions/versions/variants of the texts they are reading. It is a virtuous circle.

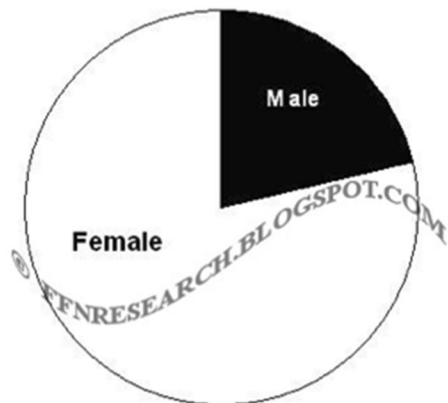
Additionally, as FF is written 'in response to narratives already in circulation' (Reynolds, 2007), that makes it by definition both an adaptation, and also entirely intertextual, in that it only exists in relation to and because of, previously existing narratives/characters. If intertextuality is the study of the relationships between texts, then FF can be seen as the bridges. They are Narratives which can only be explicated as reactions to other texts and whose readers and writers expect and require a level of specific textual knowledge. Like all adaptations FF requires both a source text and the performance of an act (the act being that of adaptation) (Oulton, 2022), but where it differs from other adaptations is that it requires an author who is also a reader, as FF can only be created by a writer who is familiar with the source material they are referencing. The explication of any FF text, be it a sequel to a pre-existing narrative; a prequel; a paradigmatic or syntagmatic story happening in an AU (alternative universe); or one taking place in a different time frame to the source text; all imply/demand a reader who is already familiar with the source material, that being why they are reading the fan text, and how they have located it. So, while the source text (if it is a traditionally published offline narrative) operates as a site where reader and author meet for the first time and construct an initial dialogue from a point of ignorance, fan texts are different, as the author and reader are already linked in a pre-existing discourse.

This positive binary of writer/reader makes FF the perfect prism for looking at young adult (YA) reading habits. Conventional offline metrics of popularity (sales figures, reviews) can be the result of factors unrelated to the act of reading, and arguably outside the control of readers themselves. YA readers are limited in what they can read by what is made available to them, be that by a school or public library, a bookstore, a parent, or a teacher. This makes the act of reading fundamentally a reactive one. FF requires the active seeking-out of particular narratives. Every fanfic is written or read because of both participants' interest in, and fore-knowledge of, another text. These texts are being selected by choice.

Gender

There are two main reasons for using FF when looking at gender within CL. Firstly, it is a relatively recently evolved story-telling medium and therefore is less burdened by the patriarchal hegemony identified by McCabe. More importantly, FF is largely written by and for women/teenage girls (LaChev, 2005; Salmon and Symons, 2004; Bury, 2005; Harris, 1998) which makes it similar to the gender make-up of the established CL market. It should therefore be possible to consider both cohorts in parallel and draw relevant conclusions. It is worth saying that due to the anonymity of content providers, and the fact that hosting sites/platforms do not require disclosure of any personal information, it is hard to determine exact data regarding the gender and the age of fan fiction users. However, in 2010 a fan-run statistics project (FFN) conducted a survey using data from users of FanFiction.net, the largest hosting site (over 10 million registered users) (FanFiction.net) who had elected to self-certify and were happy to share their data. The survey showed that an overwhelming majority of users identify as female, and the average age of users of this forum makes them predominantly teenagers. Figure 1 shows 78% of FanFiction.net members are female, while the remaining 22% self-identify as male. Figure 2 shows that 80%, of those who chose to reveal their age, are between 13 and 17 years old (Sendlor, 2011).

Fig. 1 .



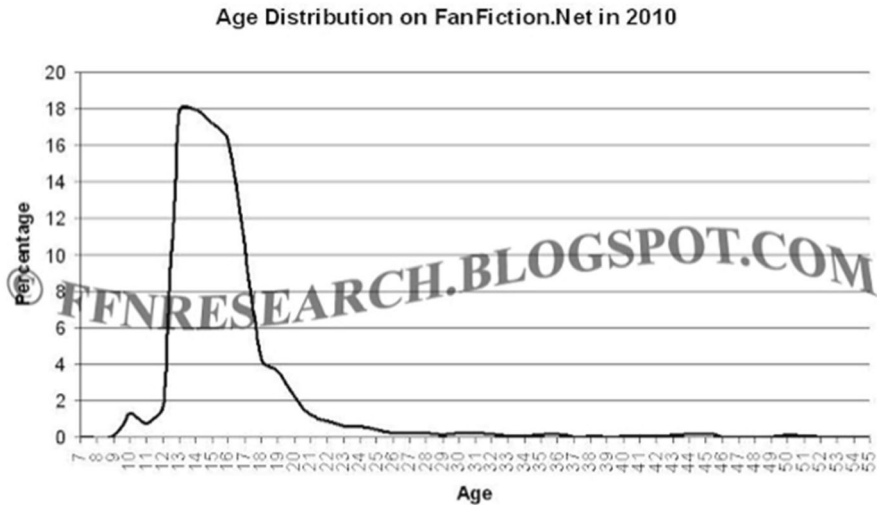


Fig. 2 .

Separate to those two specifically gender-related factors, FF is unique in several other relevant areas. The absence of paratexts, in the form of book covers, publicity, and retail strategies etc. removes a commercial element from the discourse surrounding FF texts, and that absence enables a more transparent transaction between author and reader. Such paratexts as there are; For example the FF forum hosting the story, the abstract which summarises the story content, the tags which inform the reader what to expect (the source material referenced, the romantic pairings involved, the rating of sexual descriptions etc.), operate at a level to assist the reader by enabling a visibility of content, rather than the paratexts of traditional publishing which shroud that content by interposing additional and often obfuscatory elements between author and reader. (Hellekson and Busse, 2014).

Within the world of FF, It makes sense to use Harry Potter (HP) as a source text because it is a hugely popular traditionally published narrative, which has become equally popular in the FF world. There are currently more than 379,000 stories featuring Harry himself on Archive of our own.org (AO3), and over 800,000 on Fanfiction.net. The hosting site Harrypotterfanfiction.com, which only hosted stories using the JK Rowling novels as their source texts, was absorbed into AO3 in 2021 (it was financially impossible for the founder and host to continue running it independently), at which point it contained over 85,000 stories and was receiving between fifteen and twenty million hits per month.

For these reasons, HP FF seems the perfect genre for looking at contemporary performances of gender (Butler, 1990) within CL. Within HP FF I think it is worth looking specifically at the mini genre of gender-swap because, as the nomenclature suggests, gender (I will define this more closely later) is an obligatory constituent of every story. That is not to say that the stories are solely concerned with swapping genders, but, in order to be tagged gender-swap (or any of the other tags indicating a

gender-swap has been performed: fem!harry, gender-bender, Sex-swap, gender-fuck etc.), then at least one of the canon characters (a character who features in the source text or texts) must have had their gender reversed (the stories almost always operate within a male/female sexual binary). Importantly, for this reversal to happen, a conscious act of transformation *must* be performed by the author, either within the narrative, or prior to the commencement of the narrative. This necessary act will, in all cases, have narrative consequences.

FF is published and catalogued via a number of forums or fan-sites; Livejournal, Fanfiction.net, AO3, Tumblr, etc. These online libraries require a level of pre-knowledge, as access is achieved by using specific search tools, or 'tags'. These tags act as paratexts and can be anything from *violence*, *major character death*, *marriage*, to a specific romantic pairing, ie: *Harry/Voldemort*, or *Ron/Pansy* which juxtaposition implies some sort of non-canon relationship between the two canon characters. However, apart from a pseudonym or nom de plume, these forums are completely anonymous.

Rhiannon Bury points out that computer mediated communication (CMC) was supposed to liberate authors because it could 'circumvent and indeed render irrelevant physical markers of race, gender, sexuality, ability and age that can impede face-to-face communication and the formation of community.' (Bury, 2005, p. 3). Busse takes issue with these levels of anonymity, arguing that when we consider critical race theory or post-colonial writing, the identity of the author is crucial to proper explication of the text. However, she agrees that despite the risks of 'identity tourism', there can be benefits:

The anonymity provided by online writing can be beneficial as an author can choose to foreground (or background) an identity marker (physical, social, sexual) – this provides an agency often missing in the offline world. (Busse, 2017, p. 33)

So why, when granted anonymity; no commercial barriers, and total editorial freedom, do women (who are by far the most prolific FF writers) choose to write gender swaps?

Gender Swap

Gender-swap (or genderbending) ought really to be called sex-swap, in that what is altered in the story is the character's biologically sexed body, rather than their gender. In simple terms it consists of a story where a character is differently sexed from their canon incarnation. Although there is transgender FF, the majority of gender-swap fictions operate within a traditional CIS male/CIS female binary and they are massively skewed male to female. On AO3, at the time of writing, a search for female Harry Potter brings up 35,682 entries, whereas male Hermione Granger produces only 8936. It can be a temporary switch, because of an incident in the story, or it can form part of an AU where that character was always sexed differently to canon. It is a relatively new subset of FF; to the extent that in 2007, Reynolds said:

The fundamental rule of FF is that characters must behave and speak as they do in the original: They may make different decisions and change alliances, but they must not act OOC (out of character). (Reynolds, 2007, p. 181)

This is self-evidently no longer the case. Even accepting that altering a character's sex doesn't necessarily alter their character, and indeed in some stories that lack of change is precisely the point, the surrounding characters will inevitably behave differently towards a re-sexed character. In fact, because gender-swap stories involve the re-sexing of an existing character without necessarily altering their character, they are an important part of the discourse on whether identity is determined more by biological sex or culturally constructed gender.

Writing about Sherlock Holmes gender-swap, Ann McLellan points out that when a gender-swap is performed, although the character's biological sex may change, the gendered behaviour often remains consistent with the original character, and that that in fact can be what is required by the writer (McLellan, 2014). She cites a blogger called Shadowfireflame who wrote in 2011:

Okay, so I'm coming to realize that it's not just that I want a female genius ... I actually want an *arrogant* female genius. Someone irritating, confident, abrasive, demanding. I don't want a cute little girl who demurely and quietly provides her brain powers to the betterment of humanity; I want a woman with charisma who explodes onto the scene, verbally eviscerates everyone, and then sweeps away with her massive intellect. Yeah...in short, I want a female Sherlock Holmes. (Shadowfireflame, 2011)

In other words, she wants a differently sexed but identically gendered character. That would seem to be a reaction to an absence of interestingly gendered, or interesting female-sexed characters. The Bechdel Test, which is a metric for identifying gender balance within mainstream narratives, is a commentary on exactly that absence. The test (which is now used routinely by Swedish cinemas) requires a narrative to contain three elements: there must be (at least) two named female characters within the film; they must talk to each other, and the dialogue must be about something other than a man. While the Harry Potter books pass this test, all but one of the film adaptations (*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*) fail, if we consider that 'talking to each other' implies a conversation rather than one character making an observation to another (Associated Press, 2016).

This (the desire for differently sexed characters) points to a reaction to current performances of gender within source-texts. The role of gender-swap becomes about de-sexing gender by paradoxically re-sexing it. A writer using the pseudonym TL-Chan commented in an open forum, 'usually I feel it (gender-swap) is done just because the author wants to write slash (same sex non-canon relationships), but make it straight' (Writers Anonymous Forum). In the same forum Kei-kei Yuki commented: 'most of these females now do nothing and p*** me off so bad that I hate being a freaking girl! So to change that I had to go to genderbending' (Writers Anonymous Forum).

FF Stories

Given the breadth of stories and the speed at which they proliferate, it would be reductive and pointless to hold up any story as more or less representative of the genre. The stories I have chosen to consider here are selected to illustrate one aspect of the argument, rather than being representative of all fan fictions. To locate them I used the search term ‘Harry Potter gender swap’ and put that into the two main FF hosting sites, AO3 and FanFiction.net. I will consider these stories not in terms of creative merit, but rather in how they approach the idea of gender and gender-swapping. The intention is not to seek to draw any generalised conclusion, but rather to consider why, from looking at the text, these authors may have chosen to perform a gender swap.

In *Another day in the life of Potter – redux* (2019), Nemesis 13 has written a contained story revolving around Harry becoming Lilly following an incident in potions class. The story focuses not on the swap itself, but rather on three separate (and non-gender related) strands: a romance between Lilly and Hermione, the second is Lilly becoming the heiress of Slytherin, and the third is the destruction of horcruxes. Within the story Lilly seems to have no problems with having changed sex and describes herself as ‘hot’. The absence of gender-swap related narrative elements, either for comic effect, or as a way to question the socio-political nature of gender suggests Nemesis 13 is not really interested in gender per se, but more in the idea of just ‘recasting’ Harry as female. They want to write a story within the HP world, but about a girl not a boy. Lilly is a lot less ‘straight’ than canon Harry, which in turn allows her more leeway.

Now that [absorbing some of Voldemort’s soul]...*that* was intriguing, Harry would have thrown that idea away in a moment, but Lilly... hmm... ever since the accident she just felt more in control, more... in charge of her thoughts (Nemesis 13 ch 2).

Within the story, the gender-related outcomes of the swap seem largely irrelevant. The difficulties Lilly faces are to do with her same-sex relationship with Hermione, not the fact that she has had her gender swapped.

It’s just... you are going to have to take on so much more grief and strife as a High Lady rather than a High Lord. You are powerful but we live in a patriarchal society, it will be uphill the entire way and being with me will make it even harder. I just thought... (Nemesis 13 ch 10)

The wizarding world is presented here as no more welcoming or accepting of same-sex relationships than the normal world, regardless of whether the identifying sex is or is not the result of a swap. Lilly gets angry with Hermione when her girlfriend tries to find ways to switch her back, and says her gender is a ‘non-issue’. This suggests that the gender-swap performed here is entirely functional. Like Shadowflame, Nemesis 13 seems ultimately to have wanted to write a story with a more interesting Harry, one they could identify with more, so they performed a gender-swap.

In *Holly Potter and the Witching World*, (2017) D_M_Nealey (DMN) presents us with an almost entirely re-gendered AU. It is published on AO3 and the paratextual summary at the beginning of the story states clearly that this is ‘Total AU, in which 90% of the magical world is female’. It is hard to know how this story will develop because it is a WIP (work in progress), to date DMN has posted the first twelve chapters. WIPs are interesting because other fans can suggest additions and amendments, thereby further blurring the distinction between writer and reader and creating a true ‘fan’-text. I asked DMN how they had come to write this particular AU.

Like a LOT of franchises that aren’t specifically intended for a female audience, the HP series is EXTREMELY male-dominated. Yes Hermione has been lauded as a great role model for girls, and it’s always clear that there’s no lack of a female presence in the wizarding world... but for the actual STORY, almost everything important is accomplished by the men. Hermione’s the only female character who plays an important role in all seven books.

(DMN), original

DMN’s gender-swap is radical. It is a hybrid of paradigmatic and syntagmatic adaptations as they combine canon (a hero(ine) comes up repeatedly against an evil wizard) with several key narrative differences. Dumbledore is a private investigator living with Hagrid, and it is his sister Ariana who is the headmistress of Hogwarts. Witches far outnumber wizards, and either live in covens where one wizard is shared between several witches, or are lesbians. Holly’s parents (James and Lily as per JK Rowling’s source text) are dead, and were unusual within this AU in that they lived together as a heterosexual couple. In addition, the language is much more adult, the sexuality of the characters is a key driver, and, when I asked whether this was problematic, DMN said: ‘my story isn’t intended for children, even though the main character is a child at the moment. There’ll be some pretty adult stuff down the line.’

If DMN’s story isn’t literature for children, what is it? Adult literature which happens to be about children? There are precedents for this: *The Tin Drum* by Gunter Grass features a child protagonist, as does *The Marriage Portrait* by Maggie O’Farrell and *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro, and all are arguably ‘adult’ novels. The difference with *Holly Potter* is that the source-text reached and continues to reach its audience as a children’s book. JK Rowling said in 2004 that she was flattered that fans were creating their own stories based on her characters, but that it was important the tone remained consistent: ‘If young children were to stumble on Harry Potter in an X-rated story, that would be a problem’ (Rowling fanlore, 2004).

DMN (and many others) are ignoring this, and are using source texts from children’s literature to create sites which exclude the original’s intended readership and exile them from the discourse. It is arguable that, as the paratexts clearly indicate that these texts are not intended for a child(ish) audience, this is simply a version of ‘filing off the serial numbers’. These are clearly new texts, which have been created in response to JK Rowling’s originals, but where do they sit within the discourse surrounding children’s literature?

In the story *Harriet Potter and the change of perspective* published in 2017 on FanFiction.net, MiraQuinn changes Harry into Harriet through a potions accident. It happens before the story starts, and the remaining 42 chapters are taken up with

the developing love story between Harriet and Luna Lovegood. This is effectively a femslash (non-canon lesbian relationship) story resulting from a gender-swap. It is unclear exactly why MiraQuinn chose to write this as a gender-swap story, not least as it is relatively unusual to combine gender-swap with femslash. This would suggest a desire to inhabit a lesbian paradigm, but rather than using one of the existing canon characters (Hermione Granger, Lavender Brown, Pansy Parkinson, Cho Chang, Parvati Patil et al.) the writer has chosen to perform a gender-swap. It may be that they find it easier to project themselves onto a character who is nothing like themselves, or it may be that the writer simply wondered how Harry would perform gender (Butler, 1990) if he were female?

The story itself is a very straightforward love story, as Luna and Harriet move through the traditional stages of courtship (first kiss, declaring their love for each other, co-habiting, proposal of marriage and ultimately marriage itself) with very few obstacles and little jeopardy threatening to prevent the consummation of their relationship. Draco Malfoy acts briefly as an antagonist when he decides he wants to marry the female Harry, not because he loves her, but because she should choose him over Luna. There is a moment of jeopardy when Harriet is offered the chance to become Harry again, but she never even considers it, opting to remain as Harriet. When Harry's previous partner Ginny hears that, she gets jealous and says she was sure Harry would be with her had he not become a girl. Harriet's response is interesting:

Harriet thought for a moment before answering. 'Luna is unique and beautiful. Not just in appearance, but in soul and personality. She was there for me when nobody else was. She loves me regardless of what gender I am. She has shown me happiness when I thought there was none and comfort when I've seen only nightmares.' (MiraQuinn, 2017)

The reason that this response is intriguing is clear when we consider it in extradiegetic terms. Within the world of the story it makes perfect sense, but this is a gender-swap story, and that comment makes the gender-swap almost completely irrelevant. Although the swap recasts this as a lesbian love story, on its own terms it could equally easily work as a heterosexual one. Luna never claims to be gay, nor does Harriet. Both Luna and Harriet repeatedly tell us that gender is irrelevant to their love. So why then does MiraQuinn write a gender-swap story? Performing a gender-swap is an aggressive narrative act. There is no reason to do it unless it has consequences. Yet Harriet never qualifies, or even considers the difference between the male and female experience. She has no difficulty adapting to any concerns about being a girl, no difficulties adapting to her new sex, and (Ginny and Draco aside) is accepted by everyone in Hogwarts and the wider world. Clearly the gender-swap is important, or it wouldn't have happened. Harriet even says 'she has shown me happiness when I thought there was none, and comfort when I've seen only nightmares' (MiraQuinn, 2017). Although that comment relates to Luna, it suggests a backstory fraught with unhappiness, something which never comes out in the story but has clearly been remedied by the gender-swap. Yet at no stage does Harriet express any previous gender-related unhappiness, or any confusion over why she now finds Luna attractive, when she

didn't as a boy. None of MiraQuinn's other Harry Potter stories involve gender-swaps, and in fact, *Healing Bones* (MiraQuinn 2020a, b) and *When Harry met Gabby* (MiraQuinn, 2020a, b), are both heterosexual love stories between Harry and lesser canon characters (Susan Bones and Gabrielle Delacour). Perhaps this suggests they are adapting the canon in two ways; they are remedying DM Nealey's dissatisfaction at the absence of interestingly gendered female characters within the franchise by taking less completely drawn female canon characters and elaborating on them; and by performing a gender-swap with minimal narrative consequences, they are de-sexing gender by re-sexing it.

In their story *Hermione Granger's Guide to Gender-Flip Fanfiction* (2015), Hyaroo actually twists the form back on itself. They use a gender-flip fiction (a gender-flip is a sex-reversal that happens within the story and can be reversed) to explore the creative process behind gender-swap story-telling. The story finds Hermione in the Room of Requirement with Ron and Harry as she explains to them exactly what constitutes gender-flipping in fan fiction, and they then explore why writers might do it.

'Why do you think some people write fanfiction in which, say, Harry is a girl? Yes Harry?'

Harry didn't quite know why he'd raised his hand. Must be the classroom environment. 'Maybe the author is a girl and decides to write me as a girl to better identify with me?' Hermione nodded. 'Very good. Though it seems that a majority of female fanfic authors tend to identify more with *me* and so make *me* the main character, even if they have to severely warp my personality for some of the plots they have in mind... but yes, valid reason'. (Hyaroo, 2015)

Hyaroo continues in this metafictional vein, keeping the characters 'in character' as they explore the rationales behind gender-swap fictions. Within the story Hermione performs gender-flips on Ron, Harry and finally herself, using each version to investigate how gender-swaps are carried out, and why. There is no 'plot' to speak of, the story never becomes more or less than a post-modern and self-conscious exploration of gender-swapping. Ronnie (Ron's name once he has been 'flipped') even references herself as being the protagonist of another of Hyaroo's fan fictions, this one entitled 'Weasley Girl'. In that series (a trilogy of e-novels), Hyaroo has stuck more closely to canon, and has only swapped Ron. As they say in the paratextual notes:

The reason I decided to go along with this story was because I found the new Weasley dynamic interesting; things get notably different when there are two daughters in the family as opposed to just one, and this small change of a chromosome brought on a lot of bigger changes, that in turn will lead to even bigger changes as the story goes on. (Hyaroo) (<https://archiveofourown.org/works/3721921/chapters/8243602>)

This is interesting because if we look at FF with an adaptation studies methodology, what is being adapted is unquestionably the source text, but also something else. What these stories demonstrate, is that although gender-swap/gender-flip or slash FF is written for very different reasons, it is inevitably always linked to the gap between gender and sex. On the one hand it is a clear reaction to the absence of interesting

female characters, whereas on another it represents a desire to create same-sexed but differently gendered pairings. Adaptation will always require two things: a source text and an act of adaptation (Oulton, 2022). In most FF the source text will be acknowledged and self-evident, FF being by definition a reactive medium. In gender-swap or slash, as well as the source text, the writers are adapting gender itself.

I want to look finally at a further reason for writing gender-swap, one which is more closely tied to the off-line world: role play. In the same way that it is possible to safely project our desires onto existing celebrities without ever risking having to act on those desires (Giles and Maltby, 2004), so FF affords readers/writers a site, or 'safe space', where they can safely experiment with performing differently sexed bodies or genders.

In the story *The Blossoming Rose* (2016), ozero_metallixo describes Harry's transformation into Rose by means of using a potion. They describe how Harry had always felt something was wrong:

He was really going to do it. After years of feeling like a stranger inside his own body, he was finally going to know what it felt like to be whole.

Harry takes the potion and sure enough does transition sex. Although it is incredibly painful, his reaction is relief and joy:

Watching her body continue to change, tears started to build up. It had worked, her body finally felt right! She giggled quietly at the thought, only for the sound to make her giggle more, leading to full-blown laughter. Painful transformation aside, she felt incredible. This was how she was supposed to look, this was how things should have always been!

When Hermione discovers Harry, her initial reaction is shock. The POV switches to her internal thoughts, and the story covers the fact she'd known something was wrong, but hadn't known what it was. She had assumed Harry might be gay, only to reject that and then the story switches back to her supportive and practical response.

As Harry was finally settling down, Hermione took a deep breath and prioritised. Her friend needed help, so that's what she would do. First, however, she needed information.

She asks Harry if it is permanent, and the implication in her question is 'how much thought have you put into this transition?':

No, well yes, but not in this case. The book said you have to take the potion once a day for a year for it to become permanent. I only took enough to change for a few hours. I-I just wanted to try it, for now. Then, maybe after I left school, I could make the change permanent. That way, I could get away from my fri... family. I know the Dursleys won't like this. They don't like anything... *unnatural*. But I'm not sure how everyone else would react.

What is self-evident from this story is that in the same way we might say we are 'asking for a friend', the world of Harry Potter represents a complete set of characters onto whom ozero_metallixo can project their desires, hopes and concerns. Harry, Hermione and the Dursleys have moved away from their source-material

characters, and have instead become semi-archetypal. It is not that they are acting out of character, but that they are assuming fixed roles, becoming blank canvases which can receive and re-transmit ozero_metallixo's extra-diegetic concerns. There is nothing in JK Rowling's characterisation of Harry Potter that would make a reader think he is questioning his assigned sex, but nor is there anything to prevent it. He is a broadly featureless hero, like Luke Skywalker or Frodo Baggins, and like those two, he must have few enough clearly defined character traits that any reader can project themselves onto him easily. In the same way, the Dursleys become shorthand for a society ozero_metallixo feels will disapprove, whereas Hermione represents a support network which may or may not exist, but is certainly desired.

FF in this way becomes a way to work through concerns, conscious or repressed. Shadowfireflame describes their interest in constructing Mpreg (male pregnancy) fan texts:

I don't have any kids at the moment (nor any plans to ever have kids), but I am still very interested in pregnancy and children and parenting (from a distance, anyway). So I suppose I feel I get to live these experiences vicariously through my favorite characters. (Shadowfireflame, 2013)

Kristina Busse concurs:

Fandom, with its greater tolerance, has often been a place for women to explore and negotiate issues of sexuality by reading and writing their desires, and by acknowledging and sharing sexual preferences. (Busse, 2017, p. 159)

So where does this leave Silas and his belief that only male protagonists are interesting? Is he misguided, or does the sheer volume of male to female sex-swap stories suggest that he is in some way right, and that there is an untapped market for both less traditionally gendered fiction and more female characters? It is certainly clear that when commercial constraints are removed, the fictions produced and consumed are far less traditionally gendered than mainstream (offline) fiction. They are more concerned with gender, sexuality and sexual fluidity than mainstream YA publications, and many are considerably more adult in content. This does suggest that the offline publishing market isn't necessarily providing what is wanted. But could/should FF replace traditional fiction? I would say not. FF is, by definition, a reactive form. It can only exist in dialogue with other fictions. Even FF which derives from other FF is still a de facto adaptation of an offline source text. Characters and narratives flow from the offline into the online world where they are adapted to fit the needs of 'Fans'. Increasingly this relationship is working both ways. As evidenced by *Fifty Shades of Grey* and other fan fictions which have transferred back to offline publishing (Tanjeem, 2019), when fiction produced under online rules travels into the mainstream, it can normalise subjects which had hitherto been largely taboo, such as BDSM. So, while the traditional publishing market may be operating 'behind' the online one, both in narrative style and content; a contiguity of existence, and the two-way traffic of ideas is not only desirable, but essential to both.

It is clear, and this applies as much to Silas as it does to FF, that he and it can only react to what is put in front of them. Both Silas and FF are social constructs,

both are born from, and shaped by, a reaction to existing mainstream children's literature. It is a fair assumption that as more and more writers and readers create and consume narratives in both the online and offline market, crossovers between the two will increase accordingly. While the existing offline market may not currently permit writers quite the agency afforded to fan fiction creators, it cannot help but react to how those writers and readers conceive gender. Perhaps then the market will provide Silas with some female heroes he can truly relish.

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