

The Ivory Tower and  
Harry Potter: Perspectives  
on a Literary Phenomenon

# Hermione Granger and the Heritage of Gender

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Columbia: U of

Missouri Press

2002

"People are in names, names are in people," asserts Hermione Gant, protagonist of H.D.'s posthumously published novel, *HERmione*. Hermione Gant could well have been speaking for Hermione Granger, the central female character in the Harry Potter books. Hermione, as both a name and a persona, has raised considerable interest among literary critics and the public in general. Initially the commentary focused on easy-to-resolve issues such as how to pronounce her name (Hur MY uh nee). Although Viktor Krum mispronounces Hermione when he first calls her "Hermyn—own" and then he calls her "Hermyn-own-ninny" in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (418–19), no general "making fun" of Hermione's name occurs in the books. It stands throughout the narrative as unique yet accepted. Moving on beyond her name, more substantive discourse has focused on feminist issues in relation to both Hermione and other less central female characters in the books. Reviewers, literary critics, and other readers have pondered the question of gender representation. "Well I was just wondering about the sexism in the series. Do you think it exists, even when J. K. Rowling is a woman?" queried one thoughtful thirteen-year-old.<sup>1</sup> An analysis that addresses feminist issues against the background of previous significant mythological and literary characters bearing the name Hermione responds to these uncertainties and suggests the legacy that she and Rowling may leave for future readers.

## *Mythological and Literary Heritage*

Collectively, several mythological and literary Hermiones provide a heritage for Rowling's Hermione, one of Harry Potter's two best friends.

### The Significance of Naming

Rowling frequently gives her opinion on the importance of names in the Harry Potter books:

1. Hilda Doolittle (H. D.), *HERmione*, 131; J. K. Rowling, interview by Christopher Ludden; "Do You Ever Get the Feeling the HP Books are Sexist?" ("Yellow Cherry").

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I love names, as anyone who has read the books is going to see only too clearly. . . . Snape is a place name in Britain. Dumbledore is an old English dialect word for bumblebee, because he is a musical person. And I imagine him humming to himself all the time. Hagrid is also an old English word. Hedwig was a saint, a Medieval saint. I collect them. You know, if I hear a good name, I have got to write it down. And it will probably crop up somewhere.<sup>2</sup>

The names of most of the 127 characters in the Harry Potter books have a tie to some appropriate external meaning. Reading the glossary of names is amusing in and of itself.<sup>3</sup>

Rowling has contended on several occasions that Hermione “was most consciously based on a real person, and that person was me. She’s a caricature of me when I was younger.” It is not surprising that Rowling gave careful thought to the name of this quasi-autobiographical character. Rowling’s degree from Exeter in French and Classics provided a rich resource for the name she chose for her personal representative in the book. Granting this character a distinguished literary tie through her uncommon name whose source Rowling cites as Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale* gives her the legitimacy and strength among her peers that the main male characters gain either out of heredity (Ron) or endowment (Harry). Hermione is called by her surname, “Granger,” alone far less often than either “Potter” (Harry) or “Weasley” (Ron). Although this may represent a gender-based custom, it highlights the name Hermione and gives less attention to Granger, an English surname meaning “tenant” or “farmer.”<sup>4</sup>

Ursula Le Guin’s Earthsea quartet reveals the deep significance of “naming” in modern fantasy; the naming around which her writing centers refers always to the given name, not the surname. In the first book of the series, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Dunny’s real name, Ged, is revealed to him in order for him to be able to embark on his hero quest. Ged subsequently learns the “real names” of everything, knowing that this knowledge will give him power. In the second book, *The Tombs of Atuan*, five-year-old Tenar is taken from her parents to a desert-like island where she serves the Nameless Ones, and her own name is taken away. The gift that Ged bestows on her is the return of her name. The importance of naming surfaces again in the fourth

2. J. K. Rowling, “The Surprising Success of Harry Potter.”

3. Rudolf Hein, “Harry Potter Glossary.”

4. Rowling, “Surprising Success”; Lindsey Fraser, *Conversations with J. K. Rowling*, 31. See the complete original version of William Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. Harry Potter has a quite common British surname and a given name with a distinguished and appropriate meaning—“Lord, ruler of the House”—but no apparent literary ties. Harry’s heritage as the privileged wizard among his peers affords him no need for the attention drawn to Hermione through her heritage of an out-of-the-ordinary, rich-in-literary-history name. (Hein, “Harry Potter Glossary”).

book, *Tehanu*.<sup>5</sup> In this story, Therru is given her real name, Tehanu, by Kallassin the dragon, who is her father. Le Guin bestows names in the Earthsea quartet in various ways but always with the sense that gaining one's proper name is the ultimate act in achieving one's true identity.

Hermione's role in the Potter books has some similarity to that of the characters in these high fantasy books by virtue of the significance of her name and the accompanying gender issues (to be discussed later in this chapter). Like Tehanu, it is clear that with the strength of her purposefully chosen name, Hermione cannot be weak or inconsequential.

Although Rowling cites a Shakespearean character as the inspiration for the name Hermione, a particularly fascinating feature associated with several outstanding literary Hermiones is the intertextuality among various works in which they appear, leading to the supposition that several of the Hermiones, rather than any one alone, may have influenced Rowling's naming or shaping of her literary character. However, an examination of this intertextuality is not based on speculation of Rowling's intentions but on the resemblance that I find among this community of fictional women that stretches across several thousand years and between their composite portrait and Rowling's Hermione. I agree with David Lucking's statement in his analysis of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, "the history of a name will also be the history of an identity."<sup>6</sup> A contextual placement of Hermione Granger adds depth to understanding this character and assists in analyzing her role in the magical world of Hogwarts.

### The Mythological Hermione

Hermione, the female form of Hermes, messenger of the gods, god of science, trade, and eloquence, is immortalized in Greek mythology as the daughter of Helen of Troy and Menelaus, King of Sparta. She is a daughter and a wife whose destiny is in the hands of her father and her two husbands.<sup>7</sup> The last of classical Athens' great tragic dramatists, Euripides, brings the goddess Hermione into literature and reveals more of her character through his play *Andromache*, written 428–424 B.C.E. Andromache, captive of Troy, has borne a son to Hermione's husband, Neoptolemus, and the angry goddess accuses Andromache of causing her own infertility. Euripides' reputation as a dramatist with profound psychological insight is borne out in the

5. Ursula LeGuin, *A Wizard of Earthsea; The Tombs of Atuan; Tehanu: The Last Book of Earthsea*. *Tehanu* won the Nebula Award for the best science fiction book published in 1990.

6. David Lucking, "The Price of One Fair Word": Negotiating Names in *Coriolanus*."

7. Hein, "Harry Potter Glossary"; "Hermione," *Encyclopedia Mythica*. Menelaus's pledge of Hermione to Neoptolemus is mentioned in *The Odyssey of Homer*, translated by Allen Mandelbaum, 65.

denouement of this play, and the Hermione who emerges shows a strength of intellect, determination, and the ability to achieve her purpose, even if it is through a male god. This strength of Hermione created twenty-five hundred years ago sets the stage for the Hermiones to come.

#### The Saint Hermione

The Bible introduces Hermione as a prophetess in the "Acts of the Apostles." The daughter of Philip the Deacon, she became a martyr at Ephesus and was canonized in 117 A.D. Her feast day is September 4. St. Hermione contributes to the cumulative portrait of women with this name that lead their lives with a certain determination and resilience, an intellect that gives them problem-solving ability as well as dedication to achieving their purpose.

#### The Shakespearean Hermione

The Hermione referenced by Rowling comes to life in the Shakespearean play *The Winter's Tale*. As in the myth, in this comedy of the early seventeenth century, choices made by the males in the play circumscribe Hermione's actions. She is declared unfaithful by her husband, Leontes, King of Sicilia, and imprisoned, although she is pregnant with a daughter who is born while she is confined. The daughter, Perdita, left to die, is found and raised by a shepherd. Hidden for twenty years by her attendant, Paulina, Perdita brings Hermione "back to life" when she returns, and Leontes, long repentant, receives both with joy. Shakespeare's sources for names in *The Winter's Tale* are largely from Greek and Roman origins, including works by Plutarch and Ovid.<sup>8</sup> Thus this seventeenth-century Hermione has ties with both the mythological Hermiones and current literary examples.

#### The Hermiones of H. D. and D. H. Lawrence

The Hermiones created by two early-twentieth-century British authors who were at one time involved in a tryst complete the influential literary environment from which an analysis of Rowling's Hermione emerges. The poet and novelist Hilda Doolittle, known more commonly by her initials H. D., wrote an autobiographical novel, *HERmione*, devoted to a struggle with the signifying of nomenclature. The novel, written in 1927, was published posthumously fifty-four years later and uncovered in the Beinecke Library at Yale University by her daughter Perdita (named after the daughter in *The Winter's Tale*). Perdita's introduction to *HERmione* characterizes her mother as a split personality, like the character Hermione in H. D.'s book: "Names, people; split dimensions. The protagonist is a divided personality, Her and Hermione. Hermione of Greek mythology, daughter of

8. Amanda Mabillard, "Shakespeare's Sources: *The Winter's Tale*."

Menelaus and Helen. Also, most significantly to me, Shakespeare's misunderstood heroine of *The Winter's Tale*, mother of Perdita. . . . I recognize one certainty in my future. I'll never escape the past."<sup>9</sup> What does H. D. herself have to say about her name and her heritage? Within the space of two pages in her novel, she connects her fictional alter ego with a Greek heritage, with the Shakespearean Hermione, and with an Eastern tradition. Throughout the novel/story of herself, H. D. struggles with the meaning of this name that represents what and who she is, how it is in her and she is in it, never quite reconciling the competing forces of emotion, mystery, creativity, and rationality. These aspects of her personality, like the aspects of her name, war with one another throughout her life. With the linking of her name to Greek, Shakespearean, and Eastern sources; the strong tie between her name and her search for identity and agency; and the autobiographical nature of the novel, H. D.'s Hermione is a linchpin among the various literary Hermiones and an important part of the literary backdrop behind Hermione Granger.

From 1914–1918, H. D. had a close but, according to her biographer Barbara Guest, nonsexual relationship with the writer D. H. Lawrence, who in 1919 published his novel *Women in Love*. Interestingly, and perhaps coincidentally, one of the four female protagonists in Lawrence's philosophical novel of relationships bears the name Hermione. In her analysis of the relationships among the four women in *Women in Love*, Danica Vukovic makes an observation relevant to the understanding of Hermione Granger. She describes Lawrence's Hermione as a woman who "wants to 'know' everything intellectually and control everything," words that could easily be written about Rowling's Hermione.<sup>10</sup>

### The Literary Heritage of Hermione Granger and Gender

This exploration of the linking among the various well-known mythological and literary Hermiones and the variety of their backgrounds creates a conducive environment in which to examine critically Rowling's Hermione Granger. For the reader versed in literature, the possible literary ties add a depth to Rowling's choice of an "unusual" name that makes it more than simply unusual. A name in its own right unusual, yet one that has been recorded in works by Homer, Euripides, the author of "Acts of the Apostles," Shakespeare, H. D., and D. H. Lawrence, carries a certain dignity and sense of historical and psychological significance that cannot easily be discounted. The existence of a piece of literature in which the heroine focuses

9. H. D., *HERmione*, xi.

10. Barbara Guest, *Herself Defined: The Poet H. D. and Her World*, and H. Hernandez, *A Brief Biography of H. D.*; Danica Vukovic, "Bonding and Separating of Female Characters in *Women in Love*."

almost obsessively on the origin of her name and its significance in her life reinforces this supposition.

Both the mythological and the Shakespearean Hermiones were at the mercy of the men who controlled their lives, yet they were strong women who used their wits and their position to seek their due in life. Their twentieth-century heirs are much more in control of their own destinies yet still not entirely free of male dependence.

The long, distinguished literary history of the name Hermione leaves an impression of connection and belonging. The intertextuality of its use increases the sense of a "community" of Hermiones all with some aspects of their lives, but far from everything, in common. Rowling's Hermione has a comfortable place in this distinguished literary heritage.

### *A Feminist Analysis of the Heritage of Gender in Harry Potter*

The examination of the "inherited" symbolic importance of Hermione's name has set the stage for an analysis of the heritage that Hermione Granger may leave to the future. Her legacy from the past sheds light on this examination of the meaning, development, and treatment of Hermione's persona in the Harry Potter saga.

#### The Basis for the Analysis

Feminist theory takes as givens the premises that society is patriarchal and that women do not occupy a position of political, economic, or social equality, creating difficulties and barriers for both genders. Feminism advocates for the rights and interests of women unfettered or undeterred by the patriarchal structure. Feminist theory provides various frameworks from which to examine, explain, and understand how gender affects all aspects of life, primarily focusing on females as the more disadvantaged gender, but also analyzing how the patriarchal structure negatively affects males. The end purpose of understanding and applying the feminists' point of view is to eliminate inequality for women and improve the lot of everyone.

A misconception held by some, however, is that a unified feminist perspective exists. Rosemarie Putnam Tong in *Feminist Thought* provides an articulate chronological characterization of the various types of feminist analysis. Although Tong is optimistic that at some point the labels given to various "schools of thought" will be dropped, for now "they help mark the range of different approaches, perspectives, and frameworks a variety of feminists have used to shape both their explanations for women's oppression and their proposed solutions for its elimination." Starting in the eighteenth century with Mary Wollstonecraft and other liberal feminists, Tong traces the shape of feminist thought through radical-libertarian and radical-cultural feminism, Marxist and socialist feminism, postmodern feminism,

existentialist feminism, psychoanalytical and gender feminism, multicultural and global feminism, ending with what she labels the most radical, ecofeminism. Although she presents the schools of thought chronologically, Tong describes these various groups and subgroups as a kaleidoscope—when a new train of thought appears, the old one does not disappear, but continues to coexist, although possibly in modified form. Originally, Tong says, the ephemeral nature of any one pattern, any one movement, seemed negative. Later she came to understand that change and growth are essential and are, in fact, what make feminist thought vital. Ultimately, she concludes that “not the truth but the truths will set women free.”<sup>11</sup>

Because feminist literary criticism draws from general feminist theory, it, too, is kaleidoscopic. Within the various movements, specific and somewhat rigid “truths” exist—those that Tong refers to as the good, the true, and the beautiful—but the overall picture varies both by theory and by reader. According to feminist critic Chris Weedon, “How the feminist critic fixes meaning will depend on the framework within which she reads a text. Texts may be read, for example, as expressions of women’s experience already constituted in the world beyond fiction, as an essentially feminine subjectivity . . . which seeks to reassert itself through the discursive strategies of fiction, or as specific examples of the construction of gender in language.” Roderick McGillis, in *The Nimble Reader: Literary Theory and Children’s Literature*, expresses these various feminist perspectives in yet another way: “But, just how does a feminist reading of a children’s book proceed? Well, it proceeds along one of several possible paths: an examination of the presentation of the female in literature, a reading of archetypes from a feminine perspective, an examination of feminine values and community, a focus on patriarchal modes of subject construction and ways of resistance.” Roberta Seelinger Trites expresses these same thoughts: “Referring to ‘feminism’ in the singular implies erroneously that what is actually a polymorphous and polyvocal set of theories, movements, and political actions has a unified number of principles.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, no one feminist approach to literary texts exists.

Among the theoretical (and pragmatic) approaches to feminist thought cataloged by Tong, the one that most readily accepts a variety of perspectives

11. Rosemarie Putnam Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, 1–2, 279. See also Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. This book was originally published in 1792. According to *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, tenth edition, 1995, the word “feminism” was coined in 1895, but the precepts of liberal feminism, focusing on the rights of women, were clearly laid out in the work of Wollstonecraft.

12. Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*; Roderick McGillis, *The Nimble Reader: Literary Theory and Children’s Literature*, 156; Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children’s Novels*, 143.

is postmodernist feminism. In this analysis of the Harry Potter serial novel, I take a postmodernist approach. According to Tong, "Postmodern feminists . . . remind us that as bad as it is for a woman to be bullied into submission by a patriarch's unitary truth, it is even worse for her to be judged not a real feminist by a matriarch's unitary truth . . . As I see it, attention to difference is precisely what will help women achieve unity."<sup>13</sup> In adopting the postmodern approach, I accept the "other" stance of the females in the Harry Potter books, but I do not regard it as negative, as the existential feminists might. Rather, I regard it as an opportunity to observe whether or how females may find strength and agency despite their marginalization. I borrow from a number of the feminist frameworks named by Tong and several of the "questioning stances" mentioned by Weeden and by McGillis, none of which I propose is the "one right or best way" for analysis of feminist issues. What I provide rather is a selective yet multifaceted view of gender issues in these books.

#### What Is a Feminist Children's Novel?

"What is a feminist children's novel? Defined simply, it is a novel in which the main character[s] is empowered regardless of gender." This definition is offered by Roberta Seelinger Trites in *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels*.<sup>14</sup> However, she makes a caveat in giving this definition: that the emphasis of feminist analysis has been far more on female protagonists than on males. One parameter that I place on my analysis due to time and space is to examine only the lives of girls and women in the Harry Potter books, fully acknowledging that feminism concerns itself with the issues raised in relation to all humanity, not women alone. Using the term "feminist novel" denotes a conclusion rather than merely an analysis from the point of view of feminist theory. Therefore, in *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, Trites identifies what she considers feminist novels and explains why. In this essay, I ask the question "Is this a feminist novel?" from a variety of viewpoints.

To guide my analysis and focus upon issues from various feminist perspectives, I turn to Kay Vandergrift, who has developed a model of Female Voices in Youth Literature (figure 1) through the extrapolation of feminist themes from general feminist theory, feminist literary theory, and feminist

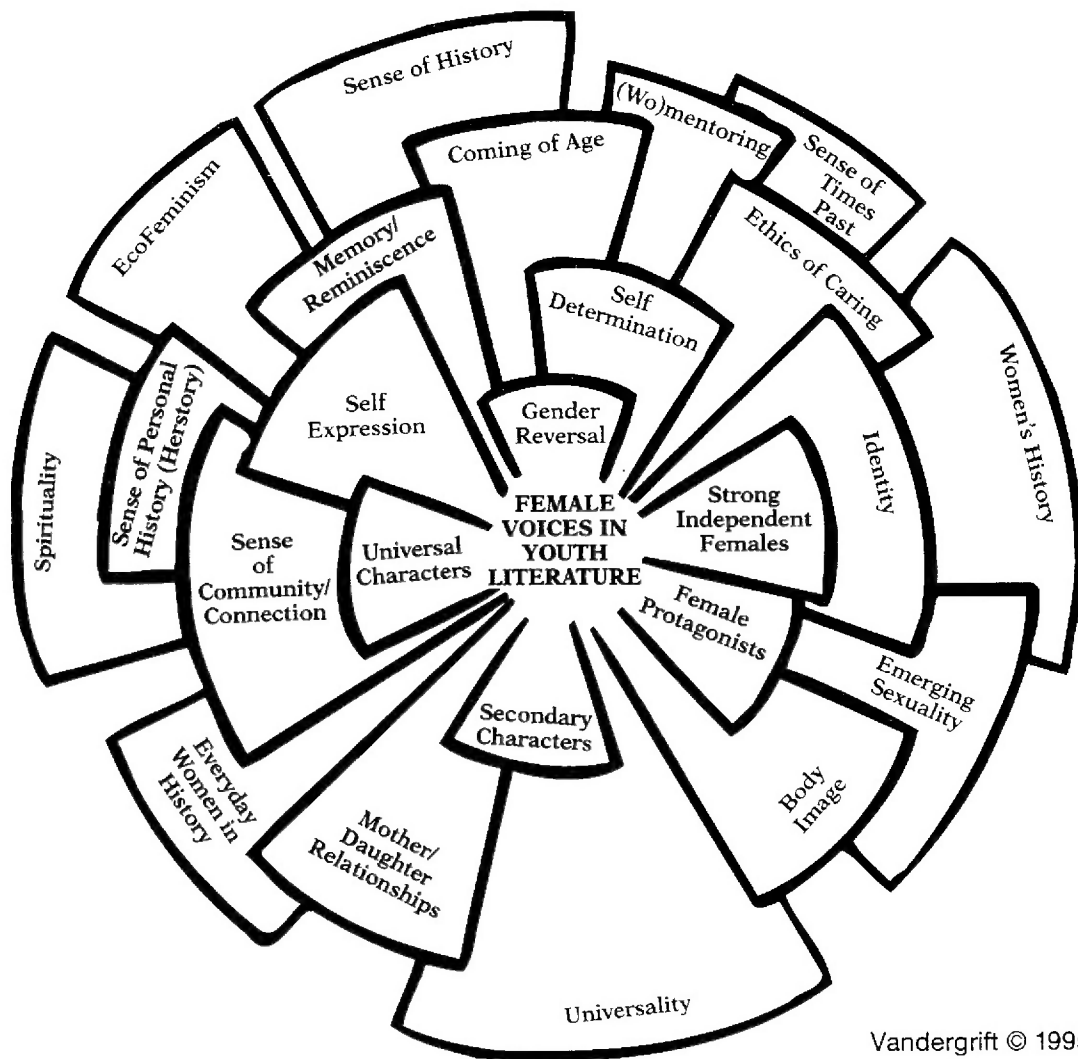
13. The postmodernist approach is somewhat akin to the one I advocate in my book *Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age* in which I note the similarity between the Radical Change theoretical approach to children's literature and that of many contemporary feminists with "the openness, connectivity and interactivity of the digital world . . . in the tradition of the female" (238). Tong, *Feminist Thought*, 279.

14. Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 4.



theories of child and adolescent development.<sup>15</sup> The model is a graphic representation of the themes she found in these three basic disciplines.

Vandergrift struggled with the visualization, wanting it to be nonhierarchical with discrete yet overlapping parts. The result is something that resembles flower petals that overlap but move outward from the center in a layered set of concentric, circular pieces. Vandergrift describes the model as “organic in nature, almost as petals of a stylized flower from which individual elements can be removed for independent study without destroying the totality of the organic form.” Concerning her model, Vandergrift asserts, “As an organic form, it is expected that this model will be modified



Vandergrift © 1995

15. Kay E. Vandergrift, “Journey or Destination: Female Voices in Youth Literature,” in *Mosaics of Meaning: Enhancing the Intellectual Life of Young Adults through Story*. For further information see <http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/model.html>.

by those who use it, growing and changing as young people and adult intermediaries find their own connections between literature and feminist theory." In this spirit, I have altered some of Vandergrift's categories, combining, expanding, or adding to them with others suggested by the work of Roberta Seelinger Trites.<sup>16</sup> Drawing upon the components of Vandergrift's mosaic model (V) and the dimensions in Trites's (T), I assembled the following gender issues to examine from a feminist perspective in the Harry Potter saga:

Role construction [subverting stereotypes (T); examining archetypes; language (T); gender reversal (V); strong independent females (V)]  
 Self-determination (V); agency (T);<sup>17</sup>  
 Sense of community/connection (V); interdependency (T)  
 Ethics of caring (V)

In applying her model, Vandergrift takes into account both the writer and the reader from a feminist stance.<sup>18</sup> I have chosen not to do this. Numerous comments from the author convince me that Rowling did not *consciously* write these texts as feminist, that is, to advocate for or promote equality or empowerment for females; she has said repeatedly that Harry sprang "fully developed" into her mind; she never gave thought to making him "Harriet." She emphasizes that she is concentrating on telling the story as she envisions and creates it, not as readers would like to see it. She defends her choice of female characters with no apologies for them. They are there because they tell the story as she wants it told:

I was writing the books for six months, before I stopped and thought: Well, he's a boy. How did that happen? Why is he a boy? Why isn't it Harriet? And number one, it was too late, Harry was too real by then for me to try to put him in a dress. That wasn't going to work. And then there was Hermione—and Hermione is an indispensable part of the books and how the adventures happen. And she is so much me that I felt no guilt about keeping the hero who had walked into my head. You know, it was uncontrived. It wasn't conscious. That's how he happened. So I kept him that way.<sup>19</sup>

I will *not* critique Rowling's writing as an essentially feminine subjectivity that seeks to reassert itself through the discursive strategies of fiction. Moreover, I carry out this analysis based on what I perceive that Rowling has done, rather than determining what she should or could have done.

16. Vandergrift, *Mosaics*, 20; Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty*.

17. It is under this topic that I will touch upon the structure of authority that is expanded upon elsewhere in this book in Farah Mendlesohn, "Crowning the King: Harry Potter and the Construction of Authority."

18. Vandergrift, *Mosaics*, 21–22.

19. Rowling, "Surprising Success."

### Hermione: Role Construction

In order to analyze Hermione and the roles of other female characters in the Harry Potter books, it is essential to differentiate between a caricature and a stereotype. Rowling has said repeatedly that Hermione is "a caricature of me when I was younger."<sup>20</sup> A caricature is a representation in literature or art that implies somewhat ludicrous exaggeration of the characteristics or features of a subject; that is, it is not "real life" but an exaggeration of real life. It is based on an individual, not a group. On the other hand, a stereotype is something conforming to a fixed or general pattern, a mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion or an uncritical judgment, and sometimes is associated with a negative prejudiced attitude, although some stereotypes have roots in positive images. A stereotype is based on a group, not an individual.

I propose that, from a feminist point of view, it is possible for a character presented through a caricature to be empowered in her role, while it is possible for a stereotypic character to be thus empowered only if she consciously subverts the stereotype. Rowling intended to construct Hermione's role as a caricature or exaggeration of herself, rather than a general stereotype of eleven- to fourteen-year-old girls. She believed herself to be writing about an individual, not depicting a group. She only partially succeeds, as sometimes her caricature bleeds over into a stereotype of girls Hermione's age.

Rowling has constructed a role and developed a caricature of her own life with Hermione in two ways. The only obvious role in the first three books is that of highly intelligent, overachieving, somewhat annoying student. We are introduced to Hermione less than midway through *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* when she encounters Harry and Ron on the train to Hogwarts. Immediately after they meet, she informs her traveling companions that she has done a great deal of background reading on the history of magic and the dark arts. Further, she informs them that Harry Potter is mentioned in two of the books she's read, so she knows everything about him. Rowling has mentioned this type of exaggerated behavior when discussing Hermione in interviews. We see almost immediately that Hermione has not yet learned how to share what she knows about either life or learning in a manner that does not aggravate her listeners. Later in the journey, in a somewhat know-it-all manner, Hermione lets Harry and Ron know that they had better put their robes on and prepare for their arrival at Hogwarts. This is a caricature rather than a stereotype because, as the story moves forward, Hermione learns to apply her knowledge in a more reasonable and appropriate way, and her knowledge becomes a valuable asset. The extreme behavior serves as an introduction to a more fleshed-out role

20. Ibid.

for her by the end of book one, developed further throughout books two and three and on into four. In book three, Hermione doubles her course work, becoming irritable and reclusive at times because she has ten subjects to study at once. This is, however, an important plot device, because near the end, Hermione uses her “secret,” the Time-Turner that Professor McGonagall gave her so that she can take two courses simultaneously, to run time backwards to save Buckbeak from execution and Sirius Black from the Dementors (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, 395–402). Hermione’s compulsion to study is a legitimate beginning place for helping her develop into a strong character; after her year of double studies, she realizes her workload is “too much” and gives the Time-Turner back to Professor McGonagall. This is one milestone of Hermione’s learning how to reconcile her love of learning with the limitations of life.

The second aspect of Hermione that is rooted in Rowling emerges in the fourth book—Hermione’s social concern on behalf of the house-elves—in a “bigger than life” manner as usual. Rowling worked for Amnesty International in London for two years, researching human rights issues in Africa. According to an article in the *London Guardian*, “[Rowling’s] heroine is the writer Jessica Mitford,” whom she admired not only as an author but also as a civil rights activist.<sup>21</sup> Mitford spent more than thirty years producing nonfiction that exposed self-serving practices related to birth, prison, death, and social injustice, and she actively opposed the Vietnam War. If Rowling admired Mitford and her writing, it makes sense for her to lead the character who represents herself in the Harry Potter saga into social activism. Rowling’s real life role in relation to social activism again is raised to the level of caricature, at least initially, in the role given to Hermione. Ron taunts Hermione about her role in this cause. “What are we now, then, the House-Elf Liberation Front? I’m not barging into that kitchen and trying to make them stop work. I’m not doing it” (*Goblet of Fire*, 374).

Hermione’s role is constructed by her actions within the confines of the story and by the language that Rowling uses to describe her behavior. Catherine Belsey represents the poststructuralist approach to literary criticism, which asserts that subjects are constructed by language in their environment—by exterior forces rather than interior unique identity.<sup>22</sup> Readers must overcome the language Rowling imposes on Hermione when she is not describing her in the “intellectual, problem solver” role to see Hermione as empowered in her role as a “strong, independent woman.” The stereotypic part of Hermione’s role constructed by Rowling relates to the hysterical and fearful, whining behavior that Hermione exhibits, and specifically to the language that Rowling employs to describe this behavior.

21. Simon Hattenstone, “Harry, Jesse, and Me.”

22. Catherine Belsey, “Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text.”

Despite the fact that, in the world of witches and wizards, magic reigns supreme, Hermione, a “mudblood” (of Muggle or nonwizard descent) employs her acquired knowledge of magic (rather than her innate ability at it) to “save the day.” Some of Hermione’s ability IS innate; she’s a witch, not a Muggle. She is a prime example that information brings power, and she sees this at work repeatedly in her life at Hogwarts. Yet throughout her role development thus far, Rowling allows Hermione to lose sight of her own strength and revert to stereotypic behavior, and she facilitates this by employing gender-related stereotypic words to Hermione’s behavior again and again. Repeatedly Rowling has Hermione “shriek,” “squeak,” “wail,” “squeal,” and “whimper,” verbs never applied to the male characters in the book. For Hermione the bossy, assertive champion of rights and problem solver, these words, at least in some contexts, seem unbelievable and completely out of character; for example, “‘Ron! Ron! Are you all right?’ squealed Hermione” (*Chamber of Secrets*, 113). Adverbial phrases are often no better—Hermione acts “in alarm,” “hysterically.” Throughout the books, Hermione often bursts into tears (all right in some circumstances but overdrawn in others). The language that constructs the roles played by Harry and Ron is much calmer, more reasoned, despite the fact that Hermione is the problem solver. In employing this technique, Rowling departs from her own experience—does she think it is necessary to portray girls as fearful, even though she herself was not? Rowling tells the *Guardian* reporter, “I never cried, I felt like it, but I never did.” The reporter comments: “Rowling is one of life’s copers.”<sup>23</sup> So is Hermione. Her hysteria and crying happen far too often to be considered a believable part of the development of Hermione’s character and are quite out of line with her core role in the book. They add nothing to an understanding of her persona or its individual caricature, nor, for the most part, anything to the story. Thus, they can only be interpreted as “how [silly, weak] girls act,” which is unfortunate from the point of view of feminist analysis.

How damaging are these stereotypical aspects of Hermione’s role? According to Rowling, readers see Hermione as strong and able to take care of herself. Between books three and four, Rowling let the word out that a significant character would get killed in *Goblet of Fire*. Rowling describes the speculation about which character this might be that preceded the book’s publication: “Mostly they [the kids] worried about Ron. As if I’m going to kill Harry’s best friend. What I find interesting is that only once has anybody said to me ‘Don’t kill Hermione,’ and that was after a reading when I said no one’s ever worried about her. Another kid said, ‘Well, yeh, she’s bound to get through OK.’ They see her as someone who is not vulnerable.”<sup>24</sup>

23. Hattenstone, “Harry, Jesse, and Me,” 32.

24. J. K. Rowling, “A Good Scare.”

There is some evidence that as Hermione's caricatured self becomes stronger in its own right, Rowling, consciously or unconsciously, is letting go of the stereotypical language and giving her the freedom to subvert the stereotypical behavior assigned to her in the early books. Hermione cries less readily and is described less frequently using the weak verbs and adjectives in book four than in any of the previous three books. She "shrieks" and "squeaks" only once, does not wail or squeal at all, and is not described as "timid" in *Goblet of Fire*, compared to more than fifteen such descriptions in *Prisoner of Azkaban*. Alternative, stronger (if not always pleasant) verbs and adjectives are employed in *Goblet of Fire*. Trites refers to this as subverting stereotypes, something that can occur during the course of a book, even if a character is not empowered at the beginning. "If she does not already know how to speak for herself, she learns in the course of the novel. If she does not already know how strong she is, she learns. If she does not already know how to combine the strengths traditionally associated with femininity with the strengths that have not been, she learns."<sup>25</sup> Not all feminists agree with this androgynous approach to feminism. While radical-libertarian feminists believe both men and women should be androgynous, that is, have access to the full range of so-called male and female characteristics, radical-cultural feminists look more to the enhancement of the so-called female qualities. Although the series is not finished, by book four Hermione seems to be in the process of combining both masculine and feminine traits and thereby subverting the stereotypes imposed on her in earlier books.

It is not precise to discuss Hermione as the hero in an archetypal hero tale because she is not the protagonist of this tale. However, the multi-layered, multifocused nature of what is happening in this novel gives some license to look at Hermione as a second hero, for the hints are clear in book four that she has her own quest to follow. This quest may or may not merge in subsequent books with that of Harry. Here the Le Guin quartet comes back into play, for the first three books are written in a typical masculine archetypal struggle, following the rules of physical prowess, perfection, and a straight line to achieving goals. Speaking of the first three books, Le Guin says, "In all three books, the fundamental power, magic, belongs to men; only to men. . . . The establishment of manhood in heroic terms involves the absolute devaluation of women."<sup>26</sup> However, by the time she writes *Tehanu*, her writing style has undergone a metamorphosis, and she breaks many of the rules of the common archetypal drama. Although it is mere supposition at this point, Hermione's story and her possible move toward a heroic venture are set out in the feminist pattern of *Tehanu*, not

25. Trites, *Sleeping Beauty*, 11.

26. Ursula Le Guin, *Earthsea Revised*, 9, 11.

that of its masculine predecessors. In this sense, Hermione's role construction might be described as a female archetype by the denouement of the saga. At this point it is impossible to tell.

One way that authors have attempted to depict strong, independent female characters is through role reversal, that is, by placing women in adventurous roles that have typically been the province of men. The virtue of role reversal may have grown out of existentialist feminism, whose most articulate proponent was Simone De Beauvoir. Her seminal work in feminist study, *The Second Sex*, described women as "the other," the second or lesser sex. De Beauvoir concluded in some cases that adopting roles played by men was the way to equalize power rather than accepting subjugated roles created by men. Robin McKinley's *The Blue Sword*, in which the female protagonist assumes the role of a male, is an example of this technique. This is not the technique employed by Rowling in constructing a role for Hermione. Her strength in the story is not achieved by construction of a typically male role for her. To this point, she does not attempt to be "Ged," nor is she the strong but to-be-rescued Tenar in the second of Le Guin's novels. It remains to be seen whether or not she is as much of a feminist heroine as is Tehanu.

#### Hermione: Self-Determination and Agency

Put quite simply, this analysis looks at just how much self-determination Rowling affords Hermione. Since Hermione's character seems to be developing in unexpected ways as she gains maturity, it is particularly difficult to say anything definitive with the story only partially told. An answer depends on speculation from threads of evidence offered.

Mendlesohn's essay in this volume is a detailed analysis of the structure of authority in the Harry Potter books. She concludes, "While the books argue superficially for fairness, they actually portray privilege and exceptionalism, not in the sense of elitism, but in a specifically hereditarian context that protects some while exposing others. In this they embody inherently conservative and hierarchical notions of authority clothed in evangelistic mythopoeic fantasy." According to most radical and contemporary feminists, "the feminist notion of a social order [is one] free from hierarchy and exclusion, the hierarchical nature of the fantasy world and its exclusiveness [are] inherently anti-feminist ideals."<sup>27</sup> There must be a caveat to this statement in that not all feminists see hierarchy as specifically male. However, radical-cultural feminists, postmodern feminists, multicultural and global feminists, and ecofeminists would most likely agree with this characterization of male structure. Clearly the administration of Hogwarts is hierarchical and neither Hermione nor any other females have the greatest power

27. Mendlesohn, "Crowning the King," 181; Elizabeth A. Messe, *Crossing the Double-Cross: The Practice of Feminist Criticism*.

or prestige in the story. Because Mendlesohn's analysis is thorough and because the structure of authority at Hogwarts is visibly anti-feminist, I will not consider the structure of authority itself but rather will focus on how much license Hermione and other females have within the confines of this structure. Are they completely subjugated to the patriarchic structure, or do they have some room to develop their own interests and standards, to "be themselves"?

Mendlesohn asserts that Hermione, a witch born of Muggles, is socially acceptable only because someone of higher status, that is, Harry Potter, draws her into the story. Furthermore, she finds that "Hermione is made to look very silly" in her campaign for the house-elves in book four.<sup>28</sup> If I were using the Marxist or socialist feminist framework or approach for this analysis, I might agree with Mendlesohn about the inevitability of suppression of the weaker in an inherently hierarchical structure. However, from a postmodern feminist point of view, looking at ways that females gain agency when they do not have it (as is often the case), I find evidence in the text to be considerably more optimistic about Hermione's self-determination than does Mendlesohn.

In addition, Rowling, through naming and personal identification, suggests that she intends for Hermione to be a strong character who continues to gain strength and self-determination rather than finding it transient. Some textual evidence exists that Hermione will negotiate a place of power in the Hogwarts hierarchy. At this point, I make my case on what we know about Hermione and her interior self-determination that propels her forward despite the barriers she has to overcome, such as her Muggle blood, the male dominance in the hierarchy of the Hogwarts world, and her sometimes overbearing personality. It must be pointed out that many feminists, including existentialist feminists and radical-libertarian feminists, would make no apologies for the overbearing, somewhat obnoxious way Hermione has of dealing with the world, pointing out that men have had the license to act in this manner without castigation.

From the very beginning when she is chosen for Gryffindor House, we know that Hermione has more to her character than merely being smart. The song of the Sorting Hat, the magical chapeau that intuitively determines where each student belongs, tells the eagerly waiting first-year student that she might belong in Gryffindor, "Where dwell the brave at heart/Their daring, nerve, and chivalry/Set Gryffindors apart" (*Sorcerer's Stone*, 118).<sup>29</sup>

28. Mendlesohn, "Crowning the King," 180.

29. In *Goblet of Fire* we find from the Sorting Hat that among the four founders of Hogwarts, it was Gryffindor who founded the tradition of the hat to carry on the selection of students for houses after the founders were gone (177).



Harry notes that sometimes the hat shouts out the house to which someone belongs at once and at other times it takes a little while to decide. It took the hat almost a minute to place Seamus Finnigan. It had a difficult time with Harry Potter, wavering between Gryffindor and Slytherin. But with Hermione, it shouted out Gryffindor without hesitation. From what we know about Hermione's propensity to "wit and learning" (*Sorcerer's Stone*, 118), the characteristics of those in Ravenclaw, we might assume that to be her fate. That there was not a moment's hesitation by the Sorting Hat foreshadows for the reader that Hermione will have "daring, nerve, and chivalry." These are all signs of self-determination, in the case of Hermione, against the external odds of initially acting chiefly as Harry's agent. It is no mistake that Hermione was sorted rapidly by the hat.

Hermione's agency develops slowly. She refuses to be deterred from her purposes, whether it be learning, admonishing about rules, or, as I believe we will see, championing the underdog. Although in the first mutual adventure the friends have with the troll, the boys rescue Hermione, in all subsequent adventures she plays a decisive role. She first wins the respect of Harry and Ron through her use of knowledge to solve many of the trio's difficulties. Harry is clearly not as knowledgeable and adept at analytical thinking as Hermione, even though he has endowed magical powers that she does not possess. Her first opportunity to save the day comes with her discovery that Nicolas Flamel, alchemist and friend of Dumbledore's, is the maker of the Sorcerer's Stone—a stone that makes gold and stops its possessor from dying. As the three friends try to find their way to the Sorcerer's Stone, they must pass through obstacles set up by the faculty. Hermione is able to solve Snape's spell because it is based on logic. As Hermione points out, "A lot of the greatest wizards haven't got an ounce of logic, they'd be stuck in here forever" (*Sorcerer's Stone*, 285). Hermione has vocalized just why she will succeed despite being born to Muggles—she is not only learning magic, but she has logic, the logic missing sometimes from her friends, Harry and Ron.

Determined action is another element of Hermione's agency in her own fate. Hermione's feelings can clearly be hurt, as, for example, in *Sorcerer's Stone* when she overhears Harry saying no one can stand her and Ron noting that she has no friends, and subsequently she turns away and hurries off in tears. Nonetheless, Hermione sticks to what she believes. The ongoing saga of Hermione's cat, Crookshanks, is a signal from Rowling that Hermione will stand up for her rights despite "bucking the crowd," and even if it means losing one of the two friends she has at that point. Could it be that Crookshanks is named after the radical reformist and caricaturist George Cruikshank, who illustrated Dickens's novels and who agreed with Dickens on the need for social reform? Will Crookshanks play a role

with Hermione in her struggle for social reform? Is this a foreshadowing? Should we think of Crookshanks as a sort of daemon of the type that appear in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy? Does his determination tell us something about the character of his owner—tough, brave, and unwanted? In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Sirius Black pinpoints Crookshanks as highly intelligent (rather than mad, as some might think).

There are two instances of Hermione's "Crookshank-like" intelligent and determined personality in *Prisoner of Azkaban*. The first is when she tells Professor McGonagall that she thinks Harry's new Firebolt broom is from Sirius Black, and Professor McGonagall confiscates it to be sure it is safe, making both Harry and Ron furious with Hermione. Just as the boys decide to apologize, Scabbers, Ron's rat, disappears, and Ron again becomes quite angry with Hermione. Although it is clear that Hermione suffers from the alienation that results in each case, she sticks to her principles. Of course, in the end she is vindicated about Crookshanks, who senses all along that Scabbers is evil. Both of these actions are signs of a female with her own agency.

One of the first signs that Hermione is going to stand up for the down-trodden is shortly after Hagrid has received word that Buckbeak the hippogriff is going to be executed. Hagrid has his face buried in a handkerchief when Malfoy says sarcastically, "Have you ever seen anything quite as pathetic?" (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, 293). Although Harry and Ron make threatening moves toward Malfoy, Hermione gets there first. With fury, she slaps him in the cheek and demands that he never say anything of that sort to Hagrid again. After this action, Hermione remembers she is a witch and pulls out her wand, combining now her logical, physical, and magical powers (one page after which she "squeaks"—entirely out of character). Malfoy has met his match.

But it is in book four that we find Hermione's self-determination coming to the forefront. She has taken on the case of the house-elves, who are slaves of the wizards. It is true that both her friends and the faculty ridicule her for her actions, that she is made to seem extreme and unreasonable, and that initially the house-elves seem worse off for her efforts to help. This is, however, precisely what happens when any individual advocates for massive social reform. History documents that those who opposed slavery were not enthusiastically welcomed or even understood by most of their contemporaries. Rowling has set up Hermione's character from the moment that she is chosen for Gryffindor to be brave at heart, to show daring, nerve, and chivalry, an indication that she may continue her advocacy for the house-elves despite her own misgivings or those of others.

Hermione asserts her independence socially from her friends also by going to the Yule Ball with Viktor Krum from Bulgaria—one of the four

students chosen to participate in the Triwizard Tournament. It is her trump card when Harry and Ron seek her out at the last minute to attend with them, yet another sign that she is becoming her own agent, free from being merely Harry Potter's friend. And who can worry about a girl who takes on the bully of the tale with sarcasm: "Twitchy little ferret, aren't you, Malfoy?" (*Goblet of Fire*, 404).

Rowling seems to have successfully, thus far, developed an emerging adolescent who appears armed to withstand the most dangerous gender-related pitfall and not retreat into silence, intimidated by the masculine world. The most typical and one of the most dreadful and long-lasting things to happen to young women as they reach adolescence is for them to "lose their voices," symbolic of their losing their self-confidence and their agency. Lynn Mikle Brown and Carol Gilligan's *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* is a study of preadolescent girls and how they lose their voices "at the crossroads" of becoming young women. Psychologist Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* also documents this adolescent silencing and the disastrous results. Joan Jacobs Brumberg, professor of history, human development, and women's studies at Cornell University, addresses this same issue in "When Girls Talk."<sup>30</sup> She reviews a number of recent books in which young girls do speak out on topics such as incest and other abuse, drug use, self-mutilation, anorexia, sexuality, and issues about school. She suggests that, although numbers of girls are now finding their voices, they do not have the connections with others or the adult world they need. Referring to the issue of articulated voice in children's literature, Trites says, "A chief characteristic of feminist children's novels is that they define relationships that foster community as an arena in which children of both sexes can safely articulate their voices."<sup>31</sup> Hermione sometimes has difficulty with her own articulation—she is "put down" throughout much of the first two books for her studying. However, this teasing tapers off considerably as Harry and Ron perceive how valuable her knowledge is to them. By the end of book three, she is lauded by Professor Lupin as the cleverest witch of her age that he's ever seen. Later in book four, Hermione is derided because of her concern for house-elves. Overall, however, there is ample evidence that Hermione is growing stronger and more articulate rather than retreating into repressed silence. Whether she is developing the autonomous, individualized girlhood observed by Brumberg even when young female adolescents do speak out remains to be seen.

30. Joan Jacobs Brumberg, "When Girls Talk." One such book, a follow-up to that of Mary Pipher, is Sara Shandler's *Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write about Their Search for Self*.

31. Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 99.

### Hermione: Sense of Community/Connection

One of the characteristics of females pointed out by Carol Gilligan of Harvard University and numerous other researchers is their sense of connection and community. Tong labels Gilligan's form of feminism a type of radical feminism known as "gender or cultural feminism," akin to psychoanalytic feminism, but capitalizing on the inherent gender strengths of being female rather than cataloging the weaknesses as in a Freudian approach. Gilligan finds it is "in women's nature" to be communal. She observes that "women perceive and construe social reality differently from men and . . . these differences center around experiences of attachment and separation."<sup>32</sup> According to Gilligan, this is not a weak position, but one of strength because intrinsic to this interdependence is a strong sense of responsibility. Women have wrongly been perceived as weak when in fact their strength is simply not defined in masculine terms.

Where does this enter the analysis of Hermione? Rowling tells us that, from the moment of the troll trauma, Hermione became Ron's and Harry's friend. Sharing this adventure served as a catalyst for their bonding. The three friends clearly respect one another, and each contributes to the relationship, as is shown by how each of them takes a lead role in solving one of the mysteries set up by the faculty to protect the Sorcerer's Stone (although Hermione's knowledge initiates the search). Hermione does miss out on fairly substantial parts of the adventures of Ron and Harry in book two. In *Chamber of Secrets* Hermione mistakes a cat's hair for that of Millicent Bulstrode, transforming herself into part cat rather than into Millicent. Later in the same story she is turned to stone. She is in the infirmary when the most exciting action takes place. However, before she is taken off stage, Hermione contributes to the denouement of both adventures—it is Hermione who reads about the transfiguration spell that later backfire on her with the wrong hair, and she is the one who suggests using this spell to get information from the Slytherins. It is also Hermione who suggests that Tom Riddle's diary might be written in invisible ink. Other than these two instances in book two, however, her time on stage seems fairly equivalent to that of Harry's other friend, Ron.

A more important question, perhaps, is whether Hermione receives anything from this relationship that helps in her own development. According to Trites, "Almost every feminist children's text shows some sort of community being built. . . . What really matters, then, about the focus on relationships in feminist children's novels is the way these novels demonstrate people interacting, gaining strength from each other, and being strong in their relationships." The emphasis here is "interdependency" rather than

32. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, 171.

dependency. What is affirming about the friendship among Harry, Ron, and Hermione is that it is heterosexual but largely not sexual—the three friends care for one another in an interdependent manner.<sup>33</sup> There are numerous examples in the books that show an interdependency among the group—if anything, Harry and Ron are more dependent on Hermione than she is on them. Many of the adventures involve the three together trying to solve a puzzle. Rowling constructs a friendship community in which Hermione demonstrates her own innate abilities and the honing of them through her study.

What is notable, however, from a feminist point of view, is the almost complete isolation of Hermione from anyone else other than Harry, Ron, and Hagrid. She is essentially without the context of “sisterhood”—she has no female friend; she is not particularly at ease with her female teachers; and, although her dentist parents are mentioned several times, we know nothing about her family except that they went to France on vacation one summer. This is in stark contrast to Harry, whose birth parents as well as the family in which he grew up are well known to us as readers, and to Ron, whose siblings and parents have large roles in the stories. When we think of Hermione as a witch-in-training, the lack of a female community seems odd, as forming a supportive community, largely of women, is a hallmark of witches and Wicca.<sup>34</sup> Although this is clearly not what the author intended for the story, nonetheless when looking at it from a number of feminist perspectives, it does nothing to strengthen an often-referred-to feminist characteristic—a closely knit, supportive, same-gender community. The multicultural, global, and ecofeminists put particular emphasis on community. While the radical-cultural feminists or gender feminists put the most emphasis on sisterhood, from the very beginning of liberal feminism with the suffragettes, female bonding has played a role in many (but certainly not all) feminist stances.

### Hermione: Ethics of Caring

Closely related to the feminist issue of community (or lack thereof) is the moral development of females, particularly the ethics of caring. This ground

33. Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 99. Ron is based on a person who was a close friend of Rowling's. She says, “Ron, who is Harry's other best friend, he's a lot like my oldest friend, who is a man called Sean. I was at school with him and the second book is dedicated to Sean” (Rowling, “Surprising Success”).

34. For information on modern witches and Wicca, see *The Witches' Voice Inc.* Rowling has repeatedly said, however, that the witches and wizards at Hogwarts—as real as they seem—are not intended to be authentic in any way other than in her imagination. It is the fear that they are that caused the Harry Potter books to receive the most censorship challenges in statistics collected by the American Library Association during 2000 and prompted the counter-censorship group Muggles for Harry Potter (now known as KidSPEAK).

for discussion, however, becomes more controversial as it enters the realm of societally constructed traits versus biological determinism. While radical feminists adhere to biological determinism, radical-libertarian feminists see overcoming it with androgyny (male and female traits embraced to the advantage of both genders), while radical-cultural or gender feminists argue that women should capitalize on it and protect it. The research of Carol Gilligan suggests that Hermione seems to embrace more of an androgynous model of moral and ethical development that has decidedly "male" components. In her study of women, Gilligan finds that the concept of morality is concerned with the activity of care and that moral development centers around understanding of responsibility and relationships. Men, on the other hand, understand the morality of fairness and tie moral development to the understanding of rights and rules. In essence this boils down to care versus justice and a focus on others versus structures. One of the issues with this characteristic is whether women learn to care for themselves as well as others. Hermione's taking care of herself in getting to the Yule Ball seems one instance in which she is capable of doing this. Gilligan states that her research provides a very different female moral perspective from that of Lawrence Kohlberg, whose study focused primarily on boys.<sup>35</sup> More in line with Kohlberg or what Gilligan suggests as the masculine view of morality, Hermione's stance against the mistreatment of the house-elves seems to be more from a sense of injustice (everyone should be treated the same) than of what might be called care (no one should be hurt).

However, although Hermione's sense of "right and wrong" is clearly often based on rules and regulations, relationships actually hold the upper hand. As much as Hermione hates breaking rules, she lies to protect her friends. The friendship among Harry, Ron, and Hermione was first solidified when Hermione deliberately lied to Professor McGonagall about what happened with the troll in the girls' bathroom to protect her friends from the teacher's discipline. Clearly this action was done out of caring rather than justice. Later, in *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Hermione takes the lead in rescuing Buckbeak from execution, out of a sense of caring for him and her friend Hagrid. The question of whether, in balance, Hermione is acting from what Gilligan and others have described as a female morality of caring (often overlooked, unheard, or disdained by men) rather than a male morality of justice or whether she is achieving an androgynous balance must be left to future analysis. She is only in early adolescence, so it is too soon to tell. Another characteristic noted by feminists who advocate for a biological determinism in women is looking inward for knowledge. Hermione does not fit this

35. Tong states that "when I wrote the first edition of this book [*Feminist Thought*], I was both impressed and overwhelmed by the diverse range of views within the radical feminist community" (2); Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 19. Kohlberg's work on moral development is the subject of Lana Whited's essay elsewhere in this book.

"female model." She is not contemplative; she constructs her knowledge almost entirely from external sources, rarely using "female intuition." She even forgets to use magic at times. "HAVE YOU GONE MAD?" Ron belted. "ARE YOU A WITCH OR NOT?" (*Sorcerer's Stone*, 278). Possibly Hermione may end up with what Belenky et al. call a "constructed knowledge," integrating what she knows intuitively with what she has learned from outside sources.<sup>36</sup> But so far, Hermione seems prone to what some feminists characterize as a "man's way of knowing"—perhaps even more so than Harry, who doesn't "know" what to do but depends on his "magic intuition"—and a "man's way of negotiating society." In either case, she is full of self-determination and insistent upon her own agency as much as possible within the structure of authority in her magical world.

### Hermione—Two Other Feminist Issues

Body image, a serious adolescent issue for young women, is only cursorily touched upon in the Harry Potter books. The most sexually provocative women are the Veela, who appear at the Quidditch World Cup and momentarily mesmerize Harry (*Goblet of Fire*, 103). Hermione seems to care little about her appearance until book four. The major issue of appearance is Hermione's teeth, which have already been described as larger than average. Then Malfoy points his magic wand and they start to grow. Later in a discussion of who is going with whom to the Yule Ball, Ron notes that Hermione's teeth are no longer fangs but "all . . . straight and—and normal-sized" (*Goblet of Fire*, 403). At the Yule Ball, Rowling gives us Harry's "take" on Hermione—he sees her sleek hair, her filmy dress, her regal way of walking, and her newly reduced teeth all as extremely attractive.

Here Harry's admiration for Hermione is shifting from her brains to her looks—and Hermione has purposefully concentrated on her body image. Radical-libertarian feminists maintain that females have the right to do whatever they want to with their bodies, while radical-cultural feminists would more likely disapprove of using the body in this manner to attract male attention. This is a minor incident, a paragraph among thousands. Is it a turning point? Is this a "red flag?" As with other developmental issues, it's simply too soon to tell.

The other feminist issue that may be surfacing through Hermione's concern for the house-elves is one common to contemporary feminist perspectives—inclusiveness and concern for all types of repression and marginalization rather than that of women alone. Vandergrift's model includes both "body image" and "Eco-Feminism" as pieces in her "Model of Female Voices in Youth Literature." Ecofeminism is the most radically inclusive form of feminism and in this sense joins multicultural and global

36. Mary Field Belenky, et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*.

feminism. According to Tong in *Feminist Thought*, realization of this affinity of women's issues with others in marginalized positions represents the major revision of her book, first published at the end of the 1980s. Tong states, "I now understand the extent to which all systems and structures of oppression interlock, reinforcing each other and feeding off of each other's venom" (278).<sup>37</sup>

Up to this point the Harry Potter saga has seemed to be about a magical wizard world in which concerns rested on good versus evil in the sense that Voldemort portrays evil—a nebulous but threatening menace. Hints that good versus evil may go beyond this come when the issue of "Muggle" versus "witch or wizard" blood is raised several times throughout the first four books. The trio of main characters has one pureblooded wizard (Ron), one mixed blood (Harry), and one Muggle-born or, in derogatory terms, "mudblood" (Hermione). By creating a main character of each type, Rowling provides a clue that purebloodedness is not to be the "ideal" in this world. But the "blood heritage" has not yet become a "cause for crusade."

However, in book four when Hermione comes forth forcefully with her Society for the Protection of Elfish Welfare (S.P.E.W.), the issue of an extended sense of social conscience enters the story. There are implied questions of race here, although Rowling has not put emphasis on racial differences per se (no racial or ethnic discrimination is directed toward Lee Jordan, Cho Chang, and Parvati Patil). The issues raised and comments made about Muggle blood, giant blood, and elf suppression represent racial as well as class discrimination in these books.

It is difficult without the remaining three books to analyze this from a feminist point of view, but if Rowling is going to emphasize these issues more in books to come (which I suspect she is), then a feminist analysis of the books would have to include acknowledgment of this inclusiveness.

#### Minerva McGonagall: What Kind of Character?

The only other female character with a significant and ongoing role in the Harry Potter books is Minerva McGonagall. McGonagall is neither a caricature nor a stereotype but a strong, independent female. Christine Schoefer writing in *Salon* magazine says, "The only female authority figure is beady-eyed, thin-lipped Minerva McGonagall, professor of transfiguration and deputy headmistress of Hogwarts. Stern instead of charismatic, she is described as eyeing her students like a 'wrathful eagle.'" Mendlesohn describes McGonagall as "unfair and hasty."<sup>38</sup> I propose that McGonagall

37. Hermione's actions, which become more and more outward-directed by book four, parallel the development of feminist movements—toward a more inclusive, comprehensive concern for others, Tong, *Feminist Thought*, 278.

38. Christine Schoefer, "Harry Potter's Girl Trouble"; Mendlesohn, "Crowning the King," 175.



is, instead, the epitome of fairness, the second in command who provides stability and discipline so that the first in command is freed to be more creative. Rather than contrasting McGonagall to Dumbledore, I contrast her role to that of Professor Snape.

Ron reports to Harry that Professor Snape, who is head of Slytherin, favors those students in his house. Harry wistfully replies that he wishes Professor McGonagall, head of Gryffindor, would favor them. Like Hermione, Professor McGonagall believes in rules but is not chained to them. She breaks a rule early in book one, and wisely so; she does not do it in the spirit of favoritism as do Snape and even the headmaster, Dumbledore. She shows the maturity not to adhere to a rule simply because it is a rule. The incident occurs after Harry's first try at flying. Professor McGonagall observes him at practice, marches him to her office, and introduces him to the captain of the team as a potential seeker, the central player on the Quidditch team. First-years are not supposed to play seeker, but Professor McGonagall immediately sees that enforcing this rule would not be advantageous. She does admonish Harry to play hard or she may change her mind about not punishing him. At the same time, she smiles kindly at Harry and notes that his father, an excellent Quidditch player himself, would have been proud of him. Later McGonagall proves herself not to be rule-bound by letting Hermione use the Time-Turner to extend her studies.

In addition to representing fairness, justice, and dependability in the Harry Potter books, Professor McGonagall also possesses a wry sense of humor, as is captured in several scenes with Professor Trelawney. Following Christmas dinner, Professor Trelawney shrieks loudly when Harry and Ron get up from the table, demanding to know which boy left his seat first. Professor McGonagall remarks, with a touch of sarcasm, that she doubts if it will matter "unless a mad axe-man is waiting outside the doors" ready to slaughter the first student in sight (*Prisoner of Azkaban*, 230).

Professor McGonagall is a strong, ethical woman. She is head of the most prestigious house, Gryffindor, and she is party to all important decisions. The structure of authority, the patriarchal society, places some constraints on her, but she is an empowered female within this structure. She seems to embody "wisdom," thus living up to her given name.

### Other Females in the Harry Potter Novels

Looking beyond Professor McGonagall, however, the female landscape at Hogwarts (or in the magic or Muggle world beyond) is somewhat bleak. It must be analyzed as a landscape, as no one character has a large enough role to make or break the story from a feminist point of view. One reason that Hermione may have no female friends is that there are few other girls at Hogwarts with whom she might be compatible. None possess her strength, assertiveness, and wisdom. Many of the background characters are

stereotypes. Certainly Petunia Dursley, a female in the family with whom Harry grew up, is unpleasant in stereotypical ways. Madame Pince, the librarian at Hogwarts, is competent but a worn-out stereotype. Professor Trelawney is more of a caricature than a stereotype but is definitely “ditzy.” Reporter Rita Skeeter is another highly exaggerated caricature. We don’t know enough about Madame Hooch, the Quidditch coach, to determine what type of person she is, although the fact that she is female speaks to some consciousness on the part of Rowling not to overbalance the choice roles for males. Professor Sprout, a female science teacher, also steps beyond the bounds of stereotype. Quidditch players, including keepers, are both male and female. Ginny Weasley and Parvati Patel might show some promise for strength beneath their silliness and giggles—Rowling deemed Parvati worthy of going to the Yule Ball with Harry. Fleur Delacour does not perform spectacularly in the Triwizard Tournament, coming in last place after the males. Lily Potter sacrificed herself for her son, Harry, but we know little else about her. Cho Chang, a seeker on a Quidditch team, so far has a minor role. Winky, the house-elf, could be called Weepy or Whiny, as she complains bitterly about her freedom. It’s a mixed and inconclusive picture. Here is the perspective of a thirteen-year-old girl who initiated a discussion among teens on the *Un-official Harry Potter Fan Club* web site with the question “Do you ever get the feeling that the HP books are SEXIST?” Her initial post was

I was just thinking about this and it occurred to me that the most developed and interesting characters are all males, and the major roles in the book are male roles.

Harry’s the hero, Voldemort’s the most powerful villain in the world, Dumbledore’s one of the best, Moody’s the most interesting Auror, nearly the whole Ministry is male, the Weasley twins are the comic relief, Sirius is the wild, fatherly figure . . . and so on. As for the female characters, we have Parvati and Lavender. They are written as giggling (and ditzy?) girls.

And Hermione? Well, I’ll take a poll. Who has the larger part in the story, Hermione or Ron? I’m not saying that I resent the books for being more masculine than feminine, but I was just wondering if anybody else felt there was some sexism. The story’s very enjoyable with all the guy characters, but I personally don’t like the way the female characters are written. And plus, wouldn’t it still have been acceptable if Voldemort had been a woman? A cold, murderous woman that is able to lead evil men. Where’s the harm in having a commanding female presence? Oh yes, and the Triwizard Tournament was also something. 3/4 of them were guys and Fleur was given last place. Any comments on that?<sup>39</sup>

The discussion went on for two weeks with a number of young people participating. The group never agreed on what “sexist” means. Most

39. “Do You Ever Get the Feeling the HP Books Are Sexist?” (“Yellow Cherry”).

participants defended Hermione and Professor McGonagall. Hermione was characterized as “smart, brave, wise, kind.” Another discussant commented that “Hermione is a more powerful witch than Ron is a wizard. Prof. McGonagall is deffinatly [*sic*] one of my favorite characters, in the top 3. I think her character is really well developed, how she manages to keep stern, and keep the respect of all her students, but at the same time it really shows through how much she cares about them. She’s assertive, deals well with every problem, stands up for what she believes in, and she’s a great teacher. I think she’s awesome!” Yet another teen reader says, “Hermione, Prof. McGonagall (she deserves bigger parts) and Mrs. Weasley (I love her!) are great examples of good, brilliant, brave witches.”<sup>40</sup> Some participants commented on the “second tier” role of the women in general. Others, in response to the original questioner, cited Crabbe, Goyle, and other male counterparts as comparable to the blander females. With many thoughtful points and counterpoints, the general consensus was that the books are “a little bit sexist,” but basically just good stories and okay. In balance, taking an overview of the entire Harry Potter world, I agree with one young reader’s perception:

The wizard world as portrayed by JKR is an ironic image or a copy of our own society. I don’t mean this is the “message” behind it all, it’s just why it’s so funny—just think of the style of the newspaper articles, the organization of the ministry and of the school, how Fudge talks exactly like all politicians do . . . so if the wizarding world is full of allusions, irony and satire about our own world, it’s very likely to mirror those social mechanisms and institutions and opinions that we consider as sexist. And so it does. The ministry is such a male-dominated thing BECAUSE OUR MINISTRIES ARE. There are very few witches in leading positions anywhere BECAUSE IT’S THE SAME WITH US. It’s part of the ironic representation of the Muggle world in its parallel, the Wizarding world.<sup>41</sup>

The one area in which Rowling falls below a mere reflection of the world as it exists is in her use of verbs and adjectives when she describes girls and women. This has already been discussed in relation to Hermione. Her use of gender-biased words is far more overtly and overly “sexist” than the roles she assigns to girls and women. The pervasive description of girls as silly, giggling, and light-headed undermines her more gender-balanced depiction of girls’ opportunities in the patriarchal hierarchy. For example, “Cedric Diggory walked past, surrounded by a large group of simpering girls” (*Goblet of Fire*, 297). There are far more descriptors of this type than justified by the

40. “Do You Ever Get the Feeling the HP Books Are Sexist?” (“CherryTea,” “Akari,” and “AndreaVera”).

41. “Do You Ever Get the Feeling the HP Books Are Sexist?” (“Lioness”).

social structure that Rowling portrays. It is the major gender-based discord in the books.

If a feminist novel is one that sets up a world to which readers can aspire rather than one that more or less reflects the existing social order, Rowling does not write a feminist novel. She reflects a patriarchal, hierarchical world. Some of the females have the opportunity to be assertive, to take leadership positions, and to be heard, but the males are dominant and are in charge—at least for the time being. The social structure of this magical world as it relates to gender is closer to reality than it is to a vision of a better world—at least through the end of book four. Rowling tells a good tale, but so far it is not a story intended for reformation based on gender issues. Thus, when I take an overall look at gender issues in the Harry Potter series, I conclude that in a general sense it will represent for future generations the far less than ideal reality of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

#### The Cinematic Hermione

On November 16, 2001, the much-anticipated film of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* was released by Warner Brothers in the United States and a number of other countries, with a full worldwide rollout by April 12, 2002. Eleven-year-old British actress Emma Watson made her film debut as Hermione. According to screenwriter Steven Kloves, he pleased Rowling by saying, unsolicited, that one reason he wanted to write the script was Hermione. "And," he says, "it's true. I read Hermione and she jumped off the page for me. I was so enchanted by her, because she's difficult and smart and funny, and sometimes unaware that she is being funny. She's a great character to write."<sup>42</sup> Kloves had an unusually active working relationship with Rowling, who often provided guidance about what was a throwaway in the books and what was essential for the yet unpublished tomes in the saga. With a perceptive screenwriter and an author heavily involved in the production, the portrayal of the cinematic Hermione would predictably be closely aligned with that of the literary Hermione.

To some extent this is accurate. Kloves does successfully create the "difficult and smart and funny" Hermione he saw in the book. Upon close analysis, however, Hermione on the screen differs somewhat from Hermione on the page. The cinematic Hermione has been "toned down" in several ways, some of which are subtle. For example, she is not quite the acerbic, absorbed young scholar whom Rowling brings to life in the book. Throughout the book, Hermione makes reference to the exact titles of the tomes she has studied when she offers her insights into a situation. In the film, the specific sources of her knowledge are removed, as are many descriptive passages about the hours and hours she studies and what she achieves, for example,

42. "International Release Dates"; Joe Nazzaro, "Scripting Spells," 22.

scoring 112 percent on Flitwick's exam in *Sorcerer's Stone*. Possibly the books' titles and remarks about Hermione's academic achievement seemed like "throwaways" to both Kloves and Rowling, and perhaps they are in the long run, but to the thoughtful reader/viewer, Hermione becomes less a scholar and more a person "endowed" with knowledge. Applying the feminist analysis framework, in the film Hermione seems somewhat less involved in determining her own fate or role. Another subtle omission is the Sorting Hat song—no longer are the characteristics of the Gryffindor students spelled out, taking away the explicit foreshadowing of the hat's quick pick for Hermione. However, gone, also, are the stereotypical adjectives associated with young females, as are some of the gestures and reactions into which they might have been translated.

In comparing Hermione as a film and book character from a feminist point of view, the most damaging omission occurs near the end as the three companions approach the Sorcerer's Stone. In the book, each child gets credit for successfully leading the others in accomplishing an especially dangerous task created to block those attempting to reach the stone. The tasks in which Harry and Ron take the lead remain in the film, but Hermione's task is omitted. Her accomplishment, which involved choosing which of seven bottles is poison, is just to her liking—it requires logical thinking. According to Hermione, many great wizards are lacking in logic and therefore could well miss the solutions to puzzles that she solves. Despite Hermione's contribution to the rescue, in the film it is the two male children who are the saviors at the end, and gone for Hermione is an important self-defining statement. From the feminist analytical framework, this is a blatant, not a subtle, denial of agency, and in fact it seizes from Hermione the opportunity to journey toward establishing her equality with the male characters. She is relegated at this point to the role of sidekick rather than that of co-equal contributor and determiner of her own fate through her own unique abilities. There are several reasons that this scene may have been omitted from the film that have nothing to do with the fact that it was Hermione's task, one of which is that it lacks the intensity and action of Harry's and Ron's episodes and may have been deemed to slow down the momentum that had been built. Nonetheless, it was an unfortunate action for the development of Hermione's character.

The jury is still out regarding an analysis of the cinematic Hermione based on the portrayal of gender. There is even more uncertainty in the deliberation than with the books since only one film has been produced.

### *Hermione and the Heritage of Gender*

What tentative conclusions about legacy can be reached from the first four books, looking backward to Hermione's mythological and literary heritage and forward to the heritage that Hermione leaves to future readers

of this saga? Hermione Granger, like all of her literary and mythological antecedents, remains secondary in her role to the males in her story. In this, she does not differ substantially from Euripides' or Shakespeare's Hermiones, although her life is less controlled by men. Her relationship to male characters in the Harry Potter novels is more akin to the contemporary Hermione of H. D. than to the ancients.<sup>43</sup> Hermione Granger does show kinship, however, with the courage and determination of her "ancestors." Like them, she makes her way as a strong female in a patriarchal structure. Euripides' Hermione stands her ground against her husband's lover; what little we know about St. Hermione shows courage and determination; Shakespeare's Hermione makes a dramatic "comeback" in order to reclaim her rightful position as queen; H. D.'s Hermione seeks strength from her own tripartite literary "heritages."

Hermione Granger starts her journey being somewhat dependent on Harry and Ron, but that dependence grows quickly into interdependence, and there is some evidence in book four that this will develop into independence. Like D. H. Lawrence's Hermione, Hermione Granger uses her intellect to gain control over her own life, but unlike her predecessors, Hermione shows signs of overcoming her unpleasant, bossy nature and of directing her intellectual energy into socially useful causes in addition to solving puzzles for Harry and her friends. To date, Rowling has produced a character who has developed steadily throughout the four books—moving toward an integrated personality with increasing agency. D. H. Lawrence's Hermione has been analyzed from the point of view of female bonding and has been found lacking in terms of lasting "sisterhood" relationships. Hermione Granger has bonded with her male friends, but at this point in the story there is no evidence that she will participate in the community of women that is a fundamental feminist characteristic. Only St. Hermione of the preceding Hermiones showed the "ethics of caring" that may be emerging with Hermione Granger in her house-elves' campaign. It is too early to tell what her "story" for future readers might be in this arena.<sup>44</sup> All in all, Rowling's Hermione stands tall among her literary antecedents.

43. Kate Millett, a radical-libertarian feminist who wrote the influential *Sexual Politics*, describes D. H. Lawrence as one of the worst perpetrators of patriarchy's female sexual suppression. Hermione Granger does not relate to the Lawrence character in this dimension, only in her intellectual approach to life.

44. Vukovic, "Bonding and Separating of Female Characters in *Women in Love*." In response to Christine Schoefer's harsh review of Rowling's females in Salon.com, Lis Langley makes this concluding comment about the gender heritage of Rowling's books: "But in the end, it's a good idea to take a reality check on the sex roles. Harry, male, is made up. Dumbledore, male, is pretend. J. K. Rowling, female, is very real, a gazillionaire, owner of a superior imagination and a way with words. . . . If that is what it's like to be 'only a woman,' who wouldn't enjoy being a girl?" From Lis Langley, "Charmed, I'm Sure."

One predictor of what Hermione Granger may become “when she grows up” comes from another character in the books, Professor Minerva McGonagall. Not only do Hermione and Minerva share mythological roots through their names, but Rowling also links them in her text. “‘You’re not telling me you *did* fly here?’ said Hermione, sounding almost as severe as Professor McGonagall” (*Chamber of Secrets*, 84). One of the teens in the online sexism discussion makes this link also: “A word about the ‘strong women,’ Hermione and Prof. McGonagall. They are actually quite similar, ever thought of Hermione taking over McGonagall’s teaching job when she’s graduated and McGonagall retires?”<sup>45</sup> Minerva was a greater goddess than Hermione and outwitted the male gods around her. Professor McGonagall has more power than Hermione Granger and to some extent, she is also wiser. There is some foreshadowing, however, that Hermione’s role may surpass the adult role that Professor McGonagall now plays, and that it may be more multidimensional. We have no evidence that Professor McGonagall has any relationship with males beyond her assistant headmaster duties, while Hermione has now moved into interaction with male characters that may go beyond friendship. Professor McGonagall has not revealed any social conscience of the type that Hermione exhibits in book four.

Judging just past the midpoint in the story, I find a great deal of promise that Hermione Granger’s heritage for future readers, viewed from a feminist perspective, will hold up as one that meets Trites’s definition of an empowered female and that satisfies feminist ideals from a number of perspectives. Hermione seems to be subverting the more stereotypic aspects of her personality and moving toward becoming a stronger, more independent (as well as healthily interdependent) character. She is not likely ever to be a champion for the rights of women in the nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century sense of liberal feminism. Yet, she may exhibit kinship with the marginalized elf population and in her work with them move into an inclusive position adhered to by multicultural, global, or ecofeminists.

From the postmodern view that I proposed to take in this analysis, the marginalized or “other” position of females is enabling rather than entrapping because it allows for change and difference. There is no unified one best way for a woman to be, no feminist ideal that can be articulated and applied. Instead the ideal for a female is to become what she wants to be with concern and respect for both self and others. Hermione is not a feminist model for engagement in sisterhood and is the antithesis of a strong female in the “shrillness” with which Rowling has at times portrayed her. But Hermione *is* seeking what she wants to become with a healthy concern and respect for both self and others.

45. “Do You Ever Feel HP Books Are Sexist?” (“Lioness”).

Rowling's Hermione is a strong, intelligent, thoughtful, compassionate female who is not only assisting the males with whom she has an interdependent relationship but also working to become her own agent as well as a catalyst for social change. This is the heritage that Hermione Granger, at the end of book four in the Harry Potter series, leaves readers of the story.