



AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Dalicia K. Fennell for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on April 22, 2013

Title: Life in (An)Other World: Issues of Otherness and Magic in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* Series

Abstract approved:

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Tara N. Williams

My thesis is comprised of two articles, titled “Journeying Through (An)Other World: Examining the Role of Magic and Transformational Otherness in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” and “Magic, Muggles, and Mudbloods: Examining Magical Otherness in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* Series.” The introduction frames the thematic, theoretical, and critical connections between these two articles. My first article argues that magic works as a catalyst for the moral and ethical transformations of Sir Gawain and Arthur’s court, respectively. I support this position by examining the romance in four parts: the effect of the introduction of magic on Gawain and the court, Gawain’s journey and shift to being an Other, Gawain’s moral transformation, and the court’s reintegration of Gawain and societal transformation. My second article examines magic in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series and argues that Rowling’s use of blood status in the books is her way of addressing issues of cultural otherness, but that while she promotes the defeat of discrimination, her ending is problematic for its support of assimilation over acculturation. A close examination of the public ideology Rowling constructs for the Wizarding world demonstrates the way language, such as the use of the term

“Mudblood,” can help promote discriminatory ideology to the point that ideology transforms into institutionalized policy.

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Life in (An)Other World: Issues of Otherness and Magic in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* Series

by  
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A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

Master of Arts

Presented April 22, 2013  
Commencement June 2013

Master of Arts thesis of Dalicia K. Fennell presented on April 22, 2013

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Dalicia K. Fennell, Author

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply appreciative to Dr. Tara Williams, my incredible advisor, for her guidance. Her detailed and honest feedback, uplifting outlook, and consistent confidence in my abilities have led me to produce a thesis of which I am extremely proud. To my committee members Dr. Meghan Freeman and Dr. Evan Gottlieb, I owe sincere thanks for the discussions and suggestions that helped shape my thesis. Their support and advice have been central to my success here at Oregon State. I would also like to extend my thanks to Dr. Robert Iltis, my Graduate School representative, for contributing his time and energy to my thesis committee. A huge thanks also to Oregon State University's School of Writing, Literature, and Film for the many opportunities and the support its faculty have offered me during my time here.

A huge amount of gratitude goes to my family and friends. To Michele Bromley and Zach Pajak, thank you for our shared commiserating, crazy 3 AM conversations, and success celebrations. Thank you also to the rest of my cohort for being such amazing people—I am so grateful to have gotten to go through this experience with all of you. I also owe a thank you to my “Corvallis family”, John, Diana, and Gibby Reynolds for all the assistance and friendship they have provided me during my time at Oregon State University. From the bottom of my heart, much love and many thanks to Nathan Raymond for his endless patience, words of comfort, and unwavering support throughout these two chaotic years. Finally, I can't give a big enough thank you to my parents, Jack and Wendy Fennell, for their lifelong support and encouragement that has pushed me to always go after my dreams.

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Life in (An)Other World: Issues of Otherness and Magic in  
*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* Series

By: Dalicia K. Fennell

## Introduction

The medieval Arthurian romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (SGGK) survives in one manuscript. Over 375 million copies of the seven *Harry Potter* books were sold in the decade between the publication of the first and seventh books, and the text was translated into over sixty languages (Granger xi). *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is written in alliterative Middle English using a bob and wheel stanza form. *Harry Potter* is written in simple, modern English prose. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s author remains anonymous, known only as the Gawain-poet. *Harry Potter*'s author, J.K. Rowling, is famous worldwide with a website available in eight languages (jkrowling.com). Despite these dramatic differences between the two texts, as well as the roughly six centuries between them, they have far more in common than one might initially expect.

In this thesis I focus on two major themes, magic and otherness, that tie these texts together. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an Arthurian romance in which the Green Knight and Sir Gawain enter into an exchange-of-blows game testing Sir Gawain's bravery, chivalry, and manhood. In the *Harry Potter* series, two young wizards and a young witch band together to fight against the dark wizard Voldemort and his efforts to create his ideal pureblood Wizarding world through the oppression of Muggles (Rowling's term for non-magical humans) and Muggle-born wizards and witches. In my first article, "Journeying Through (An)Other World: Examining the Role of Magic and Transformational Otherness in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," I argue that magic is

the force that ostracizes Sir Gawain from society and makes him, temporarily, into an other. In *Harry Potter*, this dynamic is complicated because the reader is able to identify with both the Muggles (non-magical people) and the witches and wizards as the setting moves between the two worlds. My analysis in “Magic, Muggles, and Mudbloods: Examining Magical Otherness in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* Series” shows how Rowling’s use of Britain as the Muggle world positions readers to identify themselves as Muggles despite Muggles being seen as the other by the Wizarding world, where the majority of the narrative takes place.

In both articles, I draw on the concepts of otherness described by Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek. The other is one who is viewed as being apart from the Subject society and a threat to the Enjoyment of the Subject society, which is why he or she is labeled as an other (Žižek 203). Žižek explains “a nation *exists* only as long as its specific *enjoyment* continues to be materialized in a set of social practices and transmitted through national myths that structure these practices” (202). This framework is particularly applicable to my argument despite Arthurian romances predating the concept of nationalism; Arthur’s court defines itself and is defined by its unity based on the Round Table and the chivalry of its knights. Arthur’s court functions in a similar way to how Žižek describes a nation’s existence. The court’s survival relies on its adherence to the chivalric code and the deeds of its members to support the code; this provides a structure to the court, without which the court’s orderly function would begin to disintegrate.

In Lacan’s theory of otherness, the connection between the other and the identity of the self is central (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 155). Lacan’s ideas stem from the

psychoanalytic use of “Other” (the “big Other”) and “other” (the little other) which differentiates between what the self cannot be identified with and what is being projected by the self as a reflection of the ego (Evans 132-33). Additionally, the big Other is symbolic and can simultaneously function as another subject (Evans 132-33). These understandings provide a theoretical framework for my argument because I am discussing both the big Other and the little Other as part of the otherness that functions in *SGGK* and *Harry Potter*.

In *SGGK*, the Green Knight functions as both the big Other and the little other in that the courtiers are unable to assimilate the knight and his magic through identifying with him, yet he is described as seemingly being a perfect knight in appearance and behavior, making him a reflection of the court’s understanding of themselves. In *Harry Potter*, Muggles and wizards see one another as the Other, which positions each as the big Other because each group is also taking on the role of a subject in the text. Voldemort’s view of Muggles positions them as the little other because his hatred is stemming from his own half-Muggle heritage which he disowns and attempts to purge from his identity.

This connection between self and other opens the door to understanding how one’s position as an other affects their identity formation and transformations, but furthermore it sheds light on the way society’s idea of the other plays a role in constructing a social identity for the Subject. The role of the other as a reflection of the self is also crucial in understanding Žižek’s idea because the other becomes threatening when the Subject sees something of themselves in the other. Because the Subject already

possesses the Enjoyment, the reflection of the Subject in the other increases the possibility that the other is capable of taking the Enjoyment for his or herself, thus increasing the perceived threat of the other to the Subject.

These ideas about otherness work with my analysis of the role of magic in each of the two articles. In the first, I show how magic in *SGGK* is seen as part of the other's threat (the Green Knight's challenge) to the Subject's enjoyment (the chivalric reputation of King Arthur's court). Because magic is the power through which the threat is posed, any association with magic shifts an individual from being an accepted member of the Subject society into a role as an other. In the second article, I examine how magic functions as the Enjoyment of the Wizarding world and how Muggle-born witches and wizards, through having magical abilities despite their lack of hereditary magical backgrounds, are viewed as a threat. Because Muggle-borns without magic would be nothing more than Muggles, they are perceived as more of a threat to the Subject society's Enjoyment than a half-blood or pureblood witch or wizard whose magical ability can seemingly be traced through their lineage. Because it is so rare for someone born to a magical parent not to be magical also, it would seem that magic is passed down through blood lineage, but Muggle-borns complicate this theory and open up the door to anxiety about Muggles gaining access to magic and perhaps taking it away from witches and wizards.

In both texts, the other invades the Subject community in some way. In *SGGK*, the Green Knight actually barges into Arthur's hall, bringing magic with him. In *Harry Potter*, magic first enters the Muggle world through the Dursleys' action of taking Harry

in and later through the arrival of Hagrid to tell Harry he is a wizard. Muggle culture also invades the Wizarding world through the presence of Muggle-borns who grew up and are familiar with Muggle culture rather than Wizarding culture and bring parts of their Muggle culture with them into the Wizarding world. This parallel between the two texts reveals several important points. First, magic tends to take place apart from the non-magical world and is disruptive when it happens in a non-magical setting. Second, others are positioned as being from outside of the society. Although the Wizarding world and Muggle world share physical space, their worlds and cultures remain distinctly separate. The Green Knight's world, although paralleling Arthur's court in many ways, is geographically removed, as is Morgan Le Fay, the alleged source of the magic in the romance.

Another commonality between the texts is the portrayal of magic as simultaneously appealing and dangerous. The Green Knight is described in highly romanticized terms and is extremely attractive. The language describing his physical appearance follows many of the descriptions that would be standard for describing a maiden in medieval literature, making him even more appealing. Although his beauty is enticing, he is also overtly dangerous: he enters the court hall carrying a giant axe and threatens to behead a renowned knight. While not so obviously appealing and dangerous, magic in the *Harry Potter* series is treated similarly. Harry longs to escape his life with the Dursleys in the Muggle world, and when he gets the opportunity to leave, he readily accepts it. Hogwarts, an iconic symbol of the magic that exists in the Wizarding world, is described as Harry sees it for the first time, and the scene is so artfully crafted that the

reader longs to be able to see Hogwarts castle themselves. Although the entire Wizarding world—Hogwarts, Diagon Alley, the Weasley’s’ house—is highly appealing, the reader also quickly gets the sense that the Wizarding world is a dangerous place. Harry’s parents were killed with magic, and even at age eleven, Harry must face Voldemort, the notoriously dangerous dark wizard.

In both *SGGK* and *Harry Potter*, magic functions both as something for practical use and for entertainment. The primary magical purpose of the magical green girdle in *SGGK* is to preserve its wearer’s life, making it extremely practical. The Green Knight’s use of this function to host an exchange-of-blows game however shows that the magic can also serve a more entertaining function. Looking at the text overall, we can see that magic also functions as a catalyst of a character entering into a temporary state of otherness. In *Harry Potter*, magic is used for many routine daily tasks such as transportation, chores, and communication. Magic in many instances replaces a Muggle way of completing a task and reduces the physical effort that a witch or wizard must provide. For example, rather than a person lugging a heavy suitcase up a staircase, magic allows the person to use a spell to levitate the object up the staircase, reducing the physical exertion of the individual. Magic is also used for entertainment in *Harry Potter*, as evidenced by magical joke shops and the numerous pranks of Fred and George Weasley (twin wizard characters). Other characters elect to use magic as a tool for causing fear, inflicting injury, and attaining power. While some *Harry Potter* characters perform magic to these ends, towards the end of the Middle Ages, people in power were completing these same acts through the condemnation of the use of magic.

While *SGGK* reflects medieval culture because it was written during the Middle Ages, the *Harry Potter* series draws upon traditions of medieval magic, technology, and attitudes making it a medievalist text. *Medievalism* has been defined in numerous ways by scholars working in the field, but Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl suggest that the term “refers to the art, literature, scholarship, avocational pastimes, and sundry forms of entertainment and culture that turn to the Middle Ages for their subject matter or inspiration, and in doing so, explicitly or implicitly, by comparison or by contrast, comment on the artists’ contemporary sociocultural milieu” (1). By considering the *Harry Potter* series as an example of medievalism, we can see the inspiration Rowling draws from the Middle Ages. The characteristics of her created Wizarding world such as using quills, ink, and parchment; relying on birds to carry messages; and casting magical beings as outsiders from society, intrinsically connect the series to medieval texts.

Rowling’s use of medievalism in her texts helps her construct a highly relatable, yet still unfamiliar and desirable world which co-exists within the physical space of the real world. Rowling’s construction of a magical world incorporates both the luxuries we enjoy in the present day and an ideal version of the parts of medieval culture which our culture has romanticized. The reader then gets to ‘experience’ the novelty of the Middle Ages without any of the inconveniences a historical representation would include. The medievalism in Rowling’s work functions both as a type of decoration in the texts as well as a tool for Rowling’s construction of a magical world of which the reader would want to become a permanent member.



Although the richness of Rowling's medieval references makes it easy to claim the text as inspired by medievalism, the text's satisfaction of Pugh and Weisl's second criterion is slightly more complex. If Rowling had used the historical Middle Ages as inspiration for her Wizarding world it would make it an antique place, outdated and crying for the progress of the last 600 years, yet she utilizes medievalism instead, making the Wizarding world a highly desirable place in the minds of readers—one that most long to visit or even live in. This conflict opens up the text to be explored in terms of what social commentary it is making—which I do explore in terms of the way blood status in the text is a commentary on cultural otherness.

This theme, explored through J.K. Rowling's medievalism, is also at work in *SGGK*. The common concerns over cultural otherness, assimilation, and acculturation connect these two texts across the centuries. *SGGK* plays with the idea of an individual's ability to move from part of the Subject society to a position as an other and back into the Subject society, while *Harry Potter* considers individuals who simultaneously belong to and are others in both worlds. Each text is thus examining the ways that cultural otherness can function as a fluid, shifting societal position.

Like the texts themselves, their critics share some common interests—literary influences, reader reception, and lessons provided by the texts. Medievalists are interested in a text's sources and how later scribes and authors alter a narrative for their own purposes. Because any later author is also a reader, part of this interest includes attempting to understand the reader's reception of the text. Because of the cost and rarity of manuscripts in the Middle Ages, any text that was produced held some significance to

its writer or patron, so scholars are often interested in examining the lessons a text holds because they can provide insights into medieval culture. *Harry Potter* critics, including John Granger, have been interested in the same areas and have written extensively on what can be learned from the texts, what literary traditions and sources Rowling drew upon, and why the texts are so popular.

Scholars of medievalism are interested in how non-medieval texts use the Middle Ages, so part of their work centers on the way medieval literature influences later literary works. Some, such as Umberto Eco, believe that people should “openly declare their allegiance to the particular fantasy of the past to which they subscribe: ‘we have the moral and cultural duty of spelling out what kind of Middle Ages we are talking about’” (Pugh and Weisl 2). This clear “declar[ation]” signals the critical desire to understand the sources, both literary and cultural, that an individual is drawing upon when constructing their understanding of the Middle Ages. With its many fictionalized constructions by contemporary literature and media, the historical Middle Ages has become an other within medievalism as people often elect to portray romanticized versions of the time. The final part of Pugh and Weisl’s definition of *medievalism*, that it provides a commentary, suggests that the lessons of any example of medievalism should be central in any examination, and that readers and critics should pay close attention to what commentary is being offered by the text’s invocation of the Middle Ages.

This is what I intend my following two articles to accomplish—they are meant to examine the way magic and otherness are portrayed and used, and ultimately come to reveal what we might learn or understand after reading these texts. My first article opens

the discussion by examining the medieval Arthurian romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and provides a foundation on which to understand magic and otherness in medieval literature. My second article builds on this and looks at these same topics in *Harry Potter* as a way of examining how Rowling's use of the Middle Ages allows the reader to consider and discuss these two topics in terms of the contemporary world. I hope, through this project, to further critical interest in medievalisms and discussions of how popular contemporary fiction relates to canonical literature from past eras, particularly the Middle Ages.

My two articles will contribute to the discussion of magic in medieval and medievalist literature, a topic that is rarely addressed by critics. Outside of critics like Corinne Saunders, Richard Kieckhefer, Sophie Page, magic is often ignored in scholarly work when discussing medieval literature. In "Journeying Though (An)Other World: Examining the Role of Magic and Transformational Otherness in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," I attempt to contribute to this facet of medieval literary criticism by analyzing the interaction of magic and otherness in the text. Although many *Harry Potter* critics use discussions of magic in the text as support for their arguments, these discussions tend to be tangential within the critical argument rather than being the main topic of the argument. While most literary critics have yet to broadly begin to take on magic in the *Harry Potter* series as a topic for serious scholarship, authors who are writing to the general public readership have not been shy in discussing magic. Books such as Roger Highfield's *The Science of Harry Potter: How Magic Really Works* and Stephan Harvard's *Harry Potter- The Harry Potter Spellbook Unofficial Guide* cater to

the public readership's desire to read more about the magic in *Harry Potter*. Rather than using this interest as an opportunity to connect scholarly, critical work with a broad public audience which might not normally read literary criticism, critics are instead choosing to focus on countless other issues in the text which appear more acceptable for serious scholarly work. My article "Magic, Muggles, and Mudbloods: Examining Magical Otherness in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series" takes magic as one of its major focuses. It is my hope that my examinations of the connections between magic and otherness can help to bridge the gap between current critical discussions about medieval and medievalist literature and (hopefully) future critical discussions addressing literary topics of high public interest.

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## **Journeying Through (An)Other World: Examining the Role of Magic and Transformational Otherness in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***

### Introduction

The use of magic in literature has fascinated readers for centuries, particularly its transformative abilities. From the manuscripts of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *The Canterbury Tales* to popular fantasy novels like *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*, magic enthralls readers and leads characters on transformative journeys. In medieval works like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, magic has drawn readers' attention and captured their imaginations. The word *magic* was first recorded in Geoffrey Chaucer's *General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales* in 1387 as part of the description of the pilgrim Doctor ("Magic"). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "magic" as "the use of ritual activities or observances which are intended to influence the course of events or to manipulate the natural world, usually involving the use of an occult or secret body of knowledge; sorcery, witchcraft" ("Magic"). Words like "influence" and "manipulate" speak to the negative connotations that magic often carries; it is thought of as something secretive, elusive, and dangerous. This was the way that magic was often perceived during the Middle Ages, albeit accompanied by a great social interest in its mysteries. Ironically, the definition of magic provided by the *Middle English Dictionary* implies a far less negative meaning: "(a) The knowledge of hidden natural forces...and the art of using these in calculating future events, curing disease, etc. (b) sorcery, enchantment" ("Magike").

The few scholars who study magic in medieval literature tend to focus on classifying magic, determining its function within the narrative, or examining particular characters' interactions with magic. My own argument emerges at the crossroads of two of these trends: studying magic's narrative function and characters' interactions with magic. While this article does not attempt to classify the magic in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the work done in that branch of medieval studies provides a useful backdrop against which my argument can be read. Since the distinctions in magic between demonic/natural and white/black are helpful in understanding the intent and consequences of magical practices, these distinctions can be useful to be aware of when discussing why and how otherness develops from involvement with magic. The determination of magic as demonic or natural involved moral and ethical codes represented in the literary piece because the intent behind practicing magic played a role in the type of magic it was considered to be. Cases such as the one of Perrette, a fifteenth century midwife in Paris who was accused of witchcraft for trying to heal leprosy by using the fat of a stillborn baby and was eventually pardoned by the king, show that while the ingredients of some types of magic may seem repulsive to us now, the intentions of the practitioner did play a role in determining the type of magic that was being used (Kieckhefer 62-63).<sup>1</sup>

This article focuses on the late fourteenth-century Arthurian romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*). I argue that when a non-magical individual or society encounters magic, a moral transformation begins, and sets the stage for the later ethical

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<sup>1</sup> This applies to the view of magic prior to the rise of the witch trials.

transformation. For the purposes of my argument, *moral* will be defined as pertaining to the set of values held by an individual and *ethical* will refer to the shared values of a society or major sect of society.<sup>2</sup> The individual who engages with magic is temporarily rendered an other and must defeat or overcome the magic before being reintegrated into his society. The transformation of the individual is moral and improves the individual's character while contributing to the overall ethical transformation of the individual's society. In the case of *SGGK*, the societal values in question are chivalric knightly values, which scholars Juliet and Malcom Vale explain as including combat skills, loyalty, honor, and courtesy ("Knightly Codes and Piety" 29). Not to be overshadowed in the chivalric code is the role of religion; Vale and Vale write, "Most important of all was the indissoluble link between chivalry and Christian belief," highlighting the significance that religiosity would have had in Arthur's court. Chivalry was also influenced by medieval gender roles, including the standards of courtly love, which has specific roles for the knight and lady to carry out. Chivalry and masculinity are deeply linked; the way in which a contemporary society might worry about a man's masculinity is similar to the way in which medieval societies worried about a knight's chivalry. Chivalry was something to be demonstrated, and a knight might be more or less chivalrous in different situations, yet the ideal knight consistently behaved in a chivalric manner. Because courtly love overlapped with the chivalric code, the masculinity of a knight was intrinsically connected to his chivalric status.

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<sup>2</sup> The *Middle English Dictionary's* entry for *moral* and the *Oxford English Dictionary's* entry for *ethic* show that while the medieval definition of *moral* is similar to the contemporary understanding, in the Middle Ages, the term *ethic* was conflated with the idea of a moral code and little to no distinction was made between the two terms.



Critics Richard Kieckhefer, Sophie Page, and Corinne Saunders have written about magic in medieval literature although, of the three, Saunders is the only one who specifically discusses *SGGK*. Kieckhefer has made significant contributions to the categorization of medieval magic, particularly in *Magic in the Middle Ages*, where he distinguishes natural and demonic magic while recognizing that any categories that historians establish will be immediately complicated by the complex realities of the way magic was portrayed in the Middle Ages. Page traces general relationships between gender and magic, concluding that men are often connected to magic that uses literacy and geometry (14), but women are linked to more negative aspects of magic. Women tend to be connected to magic that is harmful and subversive of nature (14). Page explains the precarious position of women in the Middle Ages, saying, “women were especially vulnerable to accusations of magic because of their presumed moral and intellectual inferiority” (60).

Scholars writing about *SGGK* often focus their efforts on exploring the sexual dynamics of the exchange-of-winning agreement, the role of aesthetics in the poem,<sup>3</sup> the power dynamics of the challenge to King Arthur’s court,<sup>4</sup> or, more recently, the role of women (Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fey) in the poem. Critics such as Trevor Dodman and David Boyd have addressed issues of complicated masculinity and queer desire in the poem with arguments that Bertilak’s exchange-of-winnings agreement is a way of teaching Gawain about maleness and that the agreement is a test of Gawain that

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<sup>3</sup> Potentially the most popular topic of the early 2000’s, critics of this subject include Jill Mann, Carl Grey Martin, Rhonda Knight, and William Woods.

<sup>4</sup> Many critics connect this theme with discussions of the aesthetics in the poem. Several contributing critics are Jill Mann, Lynn Arner, and Rhonda Knight.

complicates homosocial relations through the threat of homosexual relations. Larry D. Benson, a prolific *SGGK* scholar, in the 1960s wrote extensively about the sources for and the aesthetics of the poem. There is surprisingly little literary criticism about magic's role in *SGGK*, especially considering the prominent role of magic in this poem and in medieval literature. Critic Manish Sharma breaks this silence and writes about the Green Knight as a Terrifying Marvel, although his argument also brings in discussion of gender roles.

This article examines Gawain's personal transformation by discussing the moral changes he experiences. I also look at the way the ethics of King Arthur's court change from the beginning to the end of the poem. *SGGK* critics Rhonda Knight and William Woods have both discussed the idea of transformation in the poem. Knight examines the poem through the lens of cultural transformation while Woods is more interested in how Gawain's personal transformation connects his inner man with his exterior nature. My argument encompasses both the large group transformation Knight discusses and the individual transformation that Woods addresses. Whereas Knight works in terms of cultural transformations, I examine court ethics. I also extend Woods' position on Gawain's personal transformation by addressing the moral changes Gawain experiences, a form of matching the inner man to the outer appearance. Drastically understudied in the critical field, however, is the role of magic in Gawain's separation from the court, his moral changes, and the transformation of Arthur's court, a void that I address here.

In *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval Romance*, Corinne Saunders, a scholar of magic in medieval romance and of the *SGGK* poem, contributes a unique

critical perspective to the discussion of this text. Saunders examines magic in medieval romances, drawing upon both *SGGK* and *Sir Orfeo* for textual examples. Her book casts magical worlds as “imaginary otherworlds” that “are exotic, magical and wondrous” (2) and magic in the Middle Ages as complex, “viewed as multi-faceted, fascinating but fearful, promising but dangerous, potentially illusory but also a real possibility” (3). This description of the concurrently appealing and terrifying nature of magic matches with the perception of the “other” in post-colonial theories of Otherness, a connection that contributes to my argument.

Saunders also recognizes the transformative power of magic, which she says motivates interest in magic. Her description of this transformative power, however, refers to physical level transformations (5). Whereas Saunders’ interest in magical transformation works within the realm of the physical, I consider magic as a catalyst for *transformative otherness*, a type of transformation in which one temporarily becomes an other after an encounter with magic. This transformative experience of being an other leads to a change, usually positive, in the character and/or the character’s society. My argument parallels Saunders’ line of thinking insofar as magic causing a type of transformation, but this essay will rely on a definition of “transformation” that is morally and ethically based, as well as specific to one, specific way that transformation might occur. It is also important to note that my usage of the term *other* follows the post-colonial understanding rather than the medieval meaning and builds on the ideas of Slavoj Žižek. Otherness in the Middle Ages would have revolved around religion and race, but when I refer to an other, I am referring to one who cannot be part of the society

because he or she does not concur with the societal norm (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 155). In *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žižek discusses the relationship between the other and Enjoyment, saying that the reason we despise the other is because he is viewed as a threat to our own Enjoyment (203). *Transformational otherness* draws upon this understanding of the other, and restricts it to a temporary duration of time during which the individual diverges from the norm, magic brings about a personal or societal transformation, and the individual is re-immersed into the norm.

My examination of transformational otherness in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* provides a fresh perspective in the ongoing critical conversation about the functions of magic in literature. While I am not the first to think about the Middle Ages in terms of post-colonial theories or to examine the trajectory of the protagonist's journey in the aforementioned text, I do examine Gawain's journey in a new light, with an eye for how magic contributes to producing the temporary state of otherness, brings about individual and societal transformations, and is ultimately overcome or domesticated by the protagonist.

The travel narratives of the eighteenth century are a testament of the societal fear of explorers "going native," or adopting the other culture. Similarly, this medieval text serves as an example of the way magic was both feared and revered, and how once individuals engaged with magic they became others, set apart from their society until they could either defeat the magic or find a way to integrate it into society's accepted norm—a process which leads to moral and ethical transformations of the self and society.

### Part I: Normality Disrupted by the Other

In the narrative of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* there are two prominent characters associated with magic<sup>5</sup>—the Green Knight, who is a magical being, and Gawain, who comes to be engaged with magic. Both characters are others at some point during the narrative, but the Green Knight, as a being who remains magically engaged throughout the text, is permanently an other, whereas Gawain shifts from being an accepted member of King Arthur's court to being an other and then back again, making him an other only temporarily. Although during his time as Bertilak the Green Knight does not appear overtly magical, he is still carrying forth the magical challenge that he began in his visibly magical form, so while he does not display any magical abilities as Bertilak, he is still constantly engaged with magic. This interpretation of the Green Knight as a consistently magical being is also supported by his action of sheltering Morgan le Fey in his home the entire time the story is unfolding.

The poem spends almost a hundred lines describing Arthur's court festivities in detail before presenting the arrival of magic at the court in the form of the mysterious Green Knight. Much of the narrator's presentation of the court develops a sense of a static, unchanging court. Even the Yuletide festivities, which only happen once a year and should be exciting and spontaneous, are infused with a sense of ritual and predictability. The behavior of King Arthur, the representative figure of the state of Camelot, demonstrates the expected nature of the court's processes, which is not

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<sup>5</sup> Morgan le Fey is another character who has a strong connection to magic in this text. Although many critics have recently become very interested in her role in the narrative, my own argument does not include her because whether she is responsible for the magic or not does not affect the transformational power of the magic.

congruent with its reputation of being interesting and full of brave, chivalric knights.

King Arthur is described as following a highly expected pattern:

And also an other maner meved him eke  
 That he thurgh nobelay had nomen, he wolde never ete  
 Upon such a dere day er hym devised were  
 Of sum aventurus thing an uncouth tale,  
 Of sum mayn mervayle, that he might trawe,  
 Of alders, of armes, of other aventurus,  
 Other sum segg hym bisoght of sum siker knight  
 To joyne with hym in justyng, in jopardé to lay  
 Lede, lif for lyf, level uchon other,  
 As fortune wolde fulsun hom, the fayrer to have.  
 This watz the kynges countenaunce were he in court were,  
 At uch farande fest among his fre meny in halle.

[And also another custom moved him as well, which he had undertaken as a matter of honour: he would never eat on such a festal day until some daring matter had been related to him, a strange tale of some great marvel that he could believe, of princes, of chivalry, of other adventures, or else some man entreated him for a true knight to engage in jousting with him, for a man to lay life against life in jeopardy, either one to concede victory to the other, as fortune saw fit to help them. This was the king's custom wherever he was in court, at each splendid feast among his noble company in hall.] (90-101)<sup>6</sup>

This description shows the consistent state in which Arthur's court is existing and functioning prior to the arrival and interruption of the Green Knight. The word "countenaunce" meant "customary conduct or mode of living (as of a noble),"<sup>7</sup> which suggests that Arthur's ritual, along with the related customs, had to occur at all his feasts, not only this one. Here, the poet is establishing the normal tone of the court, and this normality is revealed to be one of expected regulatory customs perscribing how the court

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<sup>6</sup> Prose translations are from editors Malcom Andrew and Ronald Waldron's *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 5<sup>th</sup> edition.

<sup>7</sup> *Middle English Dictionary*, "countenaunce"

functions. The choices to say “an other maner,” “never etc,” and “at uch farande fest” emphasize the repetitive nature of the process and thus the standard expectations within the court.

Writing about national identity, Slavoj Žižek says, “The element which holds together a given community cannot be reduced to the point of symbolic identification: the bond linking together its members always implies a shared relationship toward a Thing, toward Enjoyment incarnated” (201). This idea of Enjoyment, the Thing which we feel the other threatens, is vividly present in the reputation of King Arthur’s court. Arthur’s demand for a story of marvels, chivalry, and adventures is a method of reinforcing the court’s identity through the repetition of its reputation and the values upon which its reputation is built. The Enjoyment of Arthur’s court, to which magic becomes a threat, is its reputation for chivalry, which is the core of the court’s identity. When the Green Knight’s arrival challenges this reputation, Gawain’s acceptance of the challenge becomes a method for preserving not only the honor of the court but also its identity.

It is not insignificant that the ritual demanded by Arthur is one of a presentation or presentations of entertainment, something that magic was considered to be (Kieckhefer 98), and that what he desires is a removed version of magic. He does not wish for any physical encounter with the marvels, rather he desires a “tale” about the marvelous. Aside from showing the consistency and plodding rituals on which the court has come to rely, this particular detail of Arthur wanting “an uncouth tale” rather than a true encounter with something marvelous speaks to the lost nature of chivalry in his court. Chivalry would demand that the knights and King Arthur live for the excitement of

encountering marvels and overcoming marvelous challenges, yet what Arthur has come to expect and desire is not a genuine act of chivalry, but a substitute. A story or tale replaces a personal encounter, and jousting replaces actual battles and challenges.

The choice of the word “tale” here is revealing; its meanings include 1a) “That which one tells, the oral or written relation of an event or a series of events *purporting* to be true” (emphasis added), 1b) “an unsubstantiated story, a secondhand report or account,” and 1c) “a story known by the teller to be untrue, a false story, fabrication.”<sup>8</sup> Each of these definitions demonstrates the doubtfulness of the truth of a “tale,” the very thing which Arthur requests. The fact that Arthur’s ritual is to hear a tale, a story that is at worst a complete lie and at best a second-hand account, goes against the chivalric reputation of King Arthur’s court which holds that his knights are brave and have true adventures. This desire for a “tale” stands in contrast to the language describing Gawain’s narrative when he returns to court at the poem’s conclusion and “telles” of his quest. This idea will be revisited when I examine Gawain’s return to and re-integration into the court.

When the Green Knight appears in the poem, the state of King Arthur’s court is immediately disrupted because rather than having a tale of the marvelous, the court has a real-life, honest encounter with it. The description of the jousting that King Arthur’s feast customs involve parallels the challenge that the Green Knight puts forth: “Of sum segg hym bisoght of sum siker kyght/ To joyne with hym in jusyng, in jopardé to lay [Or else some man entreated him for a true knight to engage in jousting with him, for a man

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<sup>8</sup> *Middle English Dictionary*, “tale”



to lay life against life in jeopardy]” (96-97). Just as jousting enters two willing knights into equal combat with each other, the Green Knight asks for an opponent in a game during which each participant willingly risks his life at the hand of the other. The difference between the two is that jousting was considered courtly and held only the possibility of death<sup>9</sup> while being struck a blow with a massive ax by a green giant almost guaranteed death, which is much more characteristic of actual wars and combat.

An examination of the court’s reception of the Green Knight shows the courtiers’ fascination with his magical qualities. The Green Knight is described as “a terrible figure” (136) who was huge in stature (137-141), highly attractive (142-145), and, along with his horse, an astounding shade of green (146-195). The court is immediately wary of this figure, not because it was odd that a knight would visit the court of King Arthur, but because of the bizarre nature of his appearance. This view of the Green Knight as strange and foreign immediately sets up a distinction between him and the knights of King Arthur, making him into an other in the minds of the court. The language of the narrator’s description suggests the court felt simultaneous terror and amazement towards the Green Knight:

For unethe watz the noyce not a whyle sesed,  
 And the first cource in the court kyndely served,  
 Ther hales in at the halle dor an aghlich mayster,  
 On the most on the molde on mesure hyghe;  
 Fro the swyre to the swange so sware and so thik,  
 And his lyndes and his lymes so longe and so grete,  
 Half etayn in erde I hope that he were,  
 Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene,

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<sup>9</sup> Vale and Vale note that while jousting at tournaments was mostly done as a method of training and a venue to present the knight’s courtliness through the display of chivalric values and adherence to codes of courtesy and honor, tournaments could occasionally result in actual death (29-30).

And that the myiest in his muckel that might ride;  
 For of his bak and is brest al were hi bodi sturne,  
 Both his wombe and his wast were worthily smale,  
 And alle his fetures folyande, in frome that he hade, ful clene;  
 For wonder of his hwe men hade,  
 Set in his semblaunt sene;  
 He ferde as freke were fade,  
 And overall enker-grene.

[For scarcely a moment after the music had finished, and the first course fittingly served in the court, there rushes in at the hall door a fearsome lord, the very biggest man on earth in height; from the neck to the middle so squarely built and so thick-set, and his loins and his limbs so long and so big, I think he was half-giant on earth, but at any rate I declare him to be the biggest man, and moreover the most elegant for his size who could ride a horse, for although his body was massive in back and in chest, both his belly and his waist were becomingly slim, and every part of him matching completely. For people were amazed at his colour, ingrained in his outward appearance; he behaved like a bold warrior, and bright green all over.] (134-150)

This passage, the first description of the Green Knight that the poem provides, encompasses the fascination of the court at his extremely green color, their fear at his size, and their admiration at his beauty. From the moment that he appears, it is obvious that he is not like most knights—before the narrator informs the reader of the potentially most stunning characteristic of the knight, his green color, we are informed that he is “an aghlich mayster” (136). The term “aghlich” means “inspiring awe or respect,”<sup>10</sup> and the figure of the Green Knight does inspire awe, as well as fear, in the court—to the point that the knights do not move to take him up on his challenge, leaving King Arthur to accept it himself. The knight’s height and stocky build are the next highlights of the

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<sup>10</sup> *Middle English Dictionary*, “a3elich”

description, and give the sense that this figure is not only fascinating, but also inherently dangerous.

The narrator's comment that he believes the Green Knight to be "half etayn" or a half giant encapsulates the magical nature of the intruding knight. Despite this reference to giants, a magical being that was usually perceived as ugly and evil based on the precedent set in Greek classics,<sup>11</sup> the narrator immediately follows his comment with a description of the Green Knight as "the myriest," so despite his intimidating and massive size, the Green Knight is considered highly attractive. The Green Knight brings magic into the non-magical court of Arthur, and it is both fascinating and terrifying. The knight's shapely form and elegant manner cause the court to be in awe of this stranger, yet his massive size and bizarre hue also give them cause to fear him. Returning to my earlier explanation of otherness as involving concurrent feelings of awe and fear, the narrator's description of the Green Knight, which alternates between tones of admiration and trepidation, seems to illustrate the otherness the court attributes to the Green Knight immediately upon his arrival.

The challenge of the Green Knight highlights the lack of chivalry in the court's knights, who fail to take up his offer. The necessity of King Arthur taking up the challenge himself indicates the shame associated with the court's lack of chivalry. The arrival of the Green Knight initiates the court's transformation because they are forced into recognizing their lack of bravery and chivalry. The Green Knight himself points out this lack to the courtiers, saying, "What, is this Arthures hous?.../ That al the rous rennes

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<sup>11</sup> Here I refer to the giants appearing in Homer's *The Odyssey*, including the Laestrygonians and the Cyclops.

of thurgh ryalmes so mony?/ Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquests,/ Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete words? [What, is this Arthur's house?...all the fame which flows through so many realms? Where now is your pride and your conquests, your ferocity and your wrath and your boastful words?]" (309-312). Here the Green Knight is highlighting the lack of chivalry in Arthur's court, first by showing that no one will stand to accept his challenge, and second by questioning their actions (or lack thereof) in comparison with the reputation they have gained for chivalry. The narrator's bold claim immediately following the Green Knight's charges against the court, —"Now is the revel and the renoun of the Rounde Table/ Overwalt with a worde of on wyghes speche [Now is the revelry and the renown of the Round Table overthrown by word of one man's speech]" (313-14), —indicates that this event signals the beginning of a broader transformation of the court. The court, which took pleasure in being known throughout the lands as being home to the bravest, fiercest knights, is now being reprimanded because they lack a single individual willing to accept a challenge. The reprimand forces them to face the reality of their court rather than continuing to believe in the projection of themselves they have constructed.

The Green Knight's otherness is intensified when he demonstrates that he is a magical being not only in appearance, but also in ability: he survives a complete decapitation. A normal knight, while superb in combat, is still subject to the limitations of mortality. Even the knights of the order of the garter,<sup>12</sup> the most prestigious rank of chivalric knighthood, could not survive a fatal blow. The Green Knight defies the

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<sup>12</sup> The Order of the Garter is referenced at the end of the poem when its motto concludes the narrative.

courtiers' expectations when he survives the blow that, by normal terms, ought to have killed him. The definitiveness of the blow Gawain delivers emphasizes the Green Knight's ability to survive and makes the event even more astounding. If his ability to survive that which would kill any mortal is not enough to set him apart from the members of the court, the act of speaking while holding his severed head by its hair certainly does the trick. Defying any semblance of normality, the knight does not attempt to re-establish his appearance by placing his head back on his neck; instead he emphasizes the dramatic strangeness of his magic by uttering his reminder from the mouth of his disembodied head. These actions solidify his position as an other in the view of the courtiers. Although some brief details in the initial description of the Green Knight held the possibility of similarities between the Green Knight and Arthur's knights, this undeniably abnormal spectacle eliminates the opportunity for the courtiers to develop and explore those parallels. In the face of such bizarre characteristics, all similarities are overshadowed or forgotten.

The court is no longer able to function by having only indirect interactions with magic, such as telling tales of the marvelous, and instead must face magic in person. From the instant the Green Knight enters the court, the tone of the feast changes and the transformation of Camelot's society begins with Sir Gawain being forced to step up and take action against the challenges of the marvelous Green Knight.

## Part II: Gawain Becomes an Other

Until the moment he accepts the Green Knight's challenge, Gawain has no prominence in the poem, and it is only because of his acceptance of the challenge that he initially gets his moment in the literary spotlight. Gawain is not mentioned until line 109, and even then he is not described beyond his position of being seated next to Guinevere, his relationship to Arthur, and his status as a good knight, all of which is told in three lines, two of which are also describing another knight that is Arthur's nephew (109-111). More striking than the late introduction of Gawain is that, after these three lines, he again disappears into the crowd of the described court and only reappears over two hundred lines later when he interrupts Arthur and the Green Knight to take Arthur's place in the challenge (339). Gawain's act of chivalric behavior, although late, begins the process of making him an other in the court. He stands out from the other knights who fail to take up the Green Knight's challenge. While Gawain remains seated amid the other knights, silent against the issued challenge, he is still a completely accepted member of the court, perhaps even more so due to his close familial relationship to King Arthur, yet once he demonstrates a chivalric value that is lacking in all the other knights, he suddenly stands out boldly from the crowd. Whereas his first appearance in the poem warrants only three shared lines, when he shows bravery, he is immediately granted a nineteen line speech, and the rest of Fitt I focuses on him and his interactions with the Green Knight.

Once the Green Knight has left the court after retrieving his head and reminding Gawain of the agreement, the poem moves quickly through the entire year to the point when Gawain must venture out of the court to carry out his end of the challenge.

Although the poem describes the goings-on at court during this year, it gives no indication that Gawain was thought of by the court as an other during this time. This seems to be an unexplained loophole in the process of transformational otherness as I have explained it—beginning as soon as Gawain accepted the challenge and engaged with the magical Green Knight.

Yet Gawain's otherness is not eliminated during the interlude of a year; rather, it is simply denied and skirted around. At the end of Fitt I, Arthur instructs Gawain, "Now sir, heng up thyn ax, that hatz innough hewen [Now, sir, hang up your axe, which has hewn enough]" (477), thereby physically dividing the symbol of the magic to which Gawain is now connected from Gawain's personhood and delaying the otherness that will inevitably ensue. This provides Gawain a temporary reprieve from his new state as an other. The phrase "hongen up the ax" means not only to hang up the weapon physically, but "to cease from activity."<sup>13</sup> The ax is the only remaining material symbol of the magic that occurred in the court, so Arthur's command to Gawain regarding the ax has the double meaning of suspending and ceasing the engagement with magic that has started. An alternative meaning of *heng* provides a secondary, underlying meaning to Arthur's order. *Heng* also means "to dwell upon (a thought)," which indicates that although Arthur orders Gawain to separate himself from the magic (at least temporarily), Gawain is, on some level, unable to remove the magical encounter completely from his thoughts.

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<sup>13</sup> The Middle English word *heng* is considered a variant form of the headword *hongen* by the *Middle English Dictionary*, both meaning, literally to "hang," as well as "to suspend," "to remain (in a state or condition)," and "dwell upon (a thought)."

Thus, rather than “ceasing” or “dwelling upon” the magic, it is “suspended” for the time being, pausing the transformational processes of both Gawain and the court.

If the Green Knight’s game had not been stretched out over a year, then it would have been easier for Gawain to submit to the returned blow acting on impulse and adrenaline, and perhaps thinking that the ax would do no worse to him than it did to the Green Knight. The respite granted by the Green Knight is as much a part of the challenge as the reception of the blow because Gawain, for the duration of a year, must live with the knowledge that he will have to uphold his end of the agreement or surrender as cowardly (456). The court, due to the yearlong delay in the game, must contemplate the realities involved in knighthood and the chivalric code because they are given so much time with Gawain while being aware of his likely impending death. So, what first appears as an eleven month break in the transformational process is actually a subtle but crucial part of the transformation.

The tone of the feast that Arthur throws for Gawain eleven months later is strikingly different than that of the opening feast when Gawain was simply an accepted part of the court. In contrast with the Yuletide feast, Gawain’s is full of grieving and downtrodden attitudes rather than celebration and joy. Although thoughts of Gawain’s task may have been put on hold for a year, the course of events is no longer avoidable for Gawain or the court. The shared stake of the court and Gawain in this transformational encounter is evidenced by the necessity of the lords and ladies being recalled to court for a second feast, this time in honor of Gawain. Much of the language describing Gawain’s feast parallels that of the Yuletide feast. Words like “rych(e)” and “revel” (40 and 538)



are used in both descriptions, and both times the lords and ladies gather at the Round Table. These similarities, while striking, also underscore the differences that are most notable. Rather than the lords and ladies spending time in pleasant pastimes (49), during the later feast they grieve for Gawain (539-40), and rather than Arthur demanding a tale of marvels before eating, a true experience with magic is brought up through Gawain's address to Arthur after the dinner. These alterations to the established norm of Camelot feasts indicate that the real has replaced the imitation, starting the transformational process for the society.

Immediately after raising the issue of Gawain leaving on the quest, the poem again reinforces his separateness from the rest of the court. The rest of the court "bowed togeder," (550) to give advice to Gawain; both the use of the word "togeder" and the long list of names of different knights indicate that Gawain is no longer part of the group. Although some of the knights are named individually, the majority remain nameless and part of the group, and none is given an individual part in the advising—it is only said that "Alle this compayny of court com...For to counseyl the knyght [All this company of the court approached...to counsel the knight]" (556-57). The focus in the following stanzas centers solely on Gawain as he prepares for his departure, creating a contrast between the individualistic nature of his quest and the social nature of the court.

Once Gawain departs from Camelot, he is marked even more boldly as an other through his physical separation from Camelot's civilization. The brief but poignant description of Gawain's departure—"Now graythed is Gawan gay,/ And light his launce right thore,/ And gef them alle goud day,/ He ende for evermore [Now noble Gawain is

prepared and took his lance right then, and wished them all good day—he thought for ever]” (666-69)—once again sets up the him/them distinction and sets him apart from society. After entering the quest, Gawain is often isolated and must rely only on himself, for the poem says that he was “oft leudlez and alone [often companionless he remains alone]” (693) and “hade he no fere bot his fole by frythez and dounez [He had no companion but his horse by woods and downs]” (695). This state of requisite self-reliance contributes to Gawain’s otherness. It is not just Camelot from which he has become an other, it is all of England, for he ventures completely out of his native land and into Wales.

Lynn Arner has looked specifically at the significance of the role English-Welsh geography plays in *SGGK* and has concluded that Wales represents a land that is “otherworldly or radically alien, a wondrous and strange territory, a place of magic and marvels” (83). Arner supports her reading using the narrator’s brief mention of the monsters that Gawain fights and defeats on his journey. The absence of human contact on his journey, part of the isolated loneliness that Gawain must endure, contributes to his transformation. His isolation is two-fold; first, he is experiencing otherness from his home court because he is now engaged with magic, and second, he is experiencing cultural otherness because he has left England, particularly civilized England. This double otherness is even more of a challenge because there is no way for Gawain to pretend that he is accepted. His geographical location, so far away from other people, allows him no opportunities to imagine that he could become a normal member of a society again because he has no society in which to take refuge.

Although he is welcomed quickly into Bertilak's court, it is clear from the moment of his arrival, that Gawain is once again an other within this setting. Through the praise of the court members who suppose that Gawain is a cut above any other knight in his land and that he must "Be prynce withouten pere/ In felde the felle men focht [Be a peerless prince in the field where fierce men fought]" (873-74), Gawain is again singled out. Although this otherness is formed from the high praise of all those in the court and is based on Gawain's reputation, once again he finds himself lacking any real companion. While Bertilak appears to be a possible companion for Gawain, the advances of Lady Bertilak make a true bond between the two men unlikely at best and impossible at worst. As Trevor Dodman has pointed out, each evening when the men do the exchange of winnings, Bertilak shares a thorough description of his day and how he came to obtain his winnings, yet Gawain, while true to his vows (with the exception of keeping the girdle), does not share the events of his day (432). This unequal participation in the main topic of the men's conversations would not facilitate any true bond of companionship between them. Although their relationship is friendly enough, certainly never unfriendly, the lack of reciprocation by Gawain in sharing the events of his day suggests that the relationship is one-sided, not the ideal conditions for fostering companionship between two individuals and certainly not fulfilling chivalry's binding of all knights as equal.

### Part III: The Transformation

The many strenuous difficulties, such as the loneliness that Gawain feels during his journey, move him towards his moral transformation. Gawain's moral transformation while an other occurs in two parts: the first is his religiosity, and the second is his behavioral chivalry. In his quest through the wilderness, Gawain learns to rely upon God and seek help through prayer. Once he arrives at Bertilak's castle, Gawain must refine his linguistic chivalry in exchanges with Lady Bertilak, an action that sets him up for the second part of his moral transformation. Linguistic chivalry, the ability to use language in a manner that upholds chivalric ideals, differs from behavioral chivalry in that the former deals with the spoken word, a more complex and subtle form of chivalry, and the latter with actions. Finally, Gawain must face his own behavior during the received blow and come to terms with what it means to be a knight of the Round Table under the chivalric code.

During Gawain's journey, the narrator relates, "Fer floten fro his frendez fremedly he rydez [Having wandered far from his friends, he rides as a stranger]" (714), emphasizing that not only has Gawain left his own land with no expectation of returning, but now he is traveling "in a foreign or inhospitable land" and "as an exile."<sup>14</sup> Gawain, who as part of the court seems to have enjoyed an easier life up until this point, finds himself being brutally tested by natural forces, yet it is not the freezing cold temperature or the danger that drives Gawain finally to pray for Mary's help:

Ner slayn with the slete hesleped in his yrnes  
Mo nyghtez then innoghe in naked rokkez,

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<sup>14</sup> Definitions are from the *Middle English Dictionary's* entry for the headword "fremeldli."

Ther as claterande fro the crest the colde borne renez,  
 And henged heghe over his hede in hard iisse-ikkles.  
 Thus in peril and payne and plytes ful harde  
 Bi contray caryez this knyght, tyl Krystmasse even,  
     Al one;  
     The knyght wel that tyde  
     To Mary made his mone,  
     That ho hym red to ryde  
     And wysse hym to sum wone.

[Nearly slain by the sleet, he slept in his armour more nights than enough, on bare rocks were the cold burn runs clattering from the crest, and the frozen water hung high over his head in hard icicles. Thus in peril and pain and severe conditions, this knight rides across country till Christmas Eve, alone. At that time the knight certainly made his lamentation to Mary, that she would direct his course and guide him to some dwelling.]  
 (729-39)

This passage explains the hardships of nature that Gawain is enduring, and it tells us that he has endured these for “mo nyghtez.” Only on Christmas Eve, when he is alone, does he choose to pray for assistance. This timing indicates that his greatest challenge on this quest is not the physical world—the beasts he slays or the dreadful conditions—but his awareness that he is completely alone, and that is what drives him to seek spiritual guidance through prayer. The experience of being an other makes him into a better knight because he is forced not only to rely upon his own strength and skill but also to submit to the power of God and actively seek spiritual help.

References to God in any form are noticeably absent from the scene of the initial beheading challenge, with the only exception being the Green Knight’s invocation of God’s name; Gawain does not call upon God for help at all in his initial task, so this admittance that he needs help from a higher power is a part of his transformation and makes him a more chivalric knight. After this turning point for Gawain, he calls upon

God for help or strength many times. In fact, the stanza following his prayer is full of Gawain's concern for finding somewhere to attend mass, something he does several times while at Bertilak's castle.

Gawain's continued otherness while in Bertilak's court causes him to become even more pious. On the third day of his exchange-of-winnings agreement, he attempts to decline the gifts of Lady Bertilak by saying he could not take anything "er God hym grace sende/ To acheve to the chaunce that he hade chosen there [Before God should send him the grace to accomplish the adventure to which he had devoted himself there]" (1837-38). Soon after his morning encounter with the lady of the house is finished, Gawain goes to the court's chapel to confess and be absolved before meeting the Green Knight again (1876-84). Both of these instances show Gawain's increased attention to his pious duty as a chivalric knight. Although in this last confession it is unclear as to whether he tells the priest of his acceptance of the lady's gift, the narrator explains that "he [the priest] asoyled hym surely and sette hym so clene/ As domesday schulde haf ben dight on the morn [and he absolved him reliably and made him as clean as if doomsday had been appointed on the next day]" (1883-84). This unquestioned state of absolution implies that Gawain is indeed rendered pure by his visit to the priest, despite the fact that he is already concealing the lady's gift. This could lead to several possible conclusions: Gawain may not yet have decided whether he would reveal the gift to Bertilak or not, thus not making it a sin; Gawain may have admitted his action to the priest in confession and been absolved; or the sin may be considered to be not in the act

of concealing the gift or intending to deceive but the still-to-come action of deception itself.

Over the duration of Gawain's stay, Bertilak is removed from the setting by the daily hunts and Lady Bertilak becomes an obstacle that Gawain must overcome. Neither character does anything to curb Gawain's state of otherness; rather, they treat him uniquely in comparison with the court's other Christmas guests. The lady's advances on Gawain reinforce his established linguistic chivalry by placing him in a position in which he must use language that avoids offending the lady but still refuses her advances. Despite the sinful nature of what Lady Bertilak is trying to convince Gawain to do, his responses are completely chivalric in that he neither rejects her nor acts upon her offer, thus enabling him to uphold his honor. This reinforcement of his linguistic chivalry, which the lady points out as being well-known, sets up the forthcoming challenge to and transformation of Gawain's behavioral chivalry because of the close relationship between word and action in chivalry.

In their first private encounter, Lady Bertilak refers to Gawain's reputation as an honorable knight, saying:

For I wene wel, iwysse, Sir Woven ye are,  
 That alle the worlde worchipez quere-so ye ride;  
 Your honour, your hendelayk is hendely prayse  
 With lordez, with ladyes, with alle that lyf bere.

[For I am well aware, indeed, you are Sir Gawain, whom all the world honours; wherever you ride, your honour, your courtesy is graciously praised by lords, by ladies, by all who live.] (1226-29)

The invocation of Gawain's reputation harkens back to the Green Knight's questioning of the reputation of Arthur's court. Just as the Green Knight's reference to the court's

reputation sparked its transformation, the lady's discussion of Gawain's reputation pushes him to live up to it by showing her perfect courtesy despite the challenges she provides. In this exchange, the discussion centers on linguistic chivalry, with the lady's compliments addressing the elegance and pleasure of Gawain's conversation. Phrases such as "your daynté wordez [your charming words]" (1253) and "with speches skere [with innocent speeches]" (1261) show Gawain's verbal dexterity and skill as he responds to the lady's suggestive flattery.

Although he initially denies his reputation for courteous speech, Gawain's linguistic chivalry is tested and proven through his exchanges with Lady Bertilak. Not only does he have to abstain from responding to her physical advances, but he must also choose his words carefully so he does not break from chivalrous ideals and dishonor his status as a guest in Lord Bertilak's home. A direct rebuff of the lady's advances would have been both offensive and dishonorable, yet Gawain must not admit or agree to any adulterous feelings or vows. This verbal exchange pattern is repeated on the second day, this time in a more complex situation—a conversation about chivalric courtly discourse and its function in matters of love. The narrator writes that Gawain "defended hym so fayr that no faut semed [defended himself so fitly that no offence was apparent]" (1551), demonstrating the strength of Gawain's linguistic chivalry.

The third day of the hunt challenges Gawain in a new way; he faces the issue of behavioral chivalry, and his choices are tested. Initially Gawain fails by accepting the green girdle from Lady Bertilak and breaking the exchange-of-winnings agreement with Bertilak, two actions with dishonest intents. These failures stand in stark contrast to the



lengths to which Gawain goes in order to uphold his agreement with the Green Knight. Although Gawain is willing to sacrifice his life to fulfill his publicly made agreement for the honor of Arthur's court, which he represents, he sacrifices his private honor for the chance to survive the Green Knight's blow and still be able to preserve his public honor. When Gawain finally submits to the lady's advances, it is with the intent to deceive the Green Knight and use a loophole to survive the agreed upon blow:

Then kest the knyght, and hit come to his hert  
 Hit were a juel for the jopardé that hym jugged were:  
 When he ached to the chapel his chek for to fech,  
 Myght he haf slypped to be unslayn, the sleght were noble.  
 Thenne he thulged with her threpe and tholed hir to speke,  
 And ho bere on hym the belt and bede hit hym swythe—  
 And he granted and hym gafe with a goud wylle—

[Then the knight considered, and it came to his mind that it would be a godsend for the hazard assigned to him: when he reached the chapel to receive his doom, if he could escape without getting killed it would be a fine stratagem. Then he gave in to her insistence and allowed her to speak, and she pressed the belt on him and offered it to him earnestly, and he consented and gave in of his own free will.] (1855-61)

The language of this passage makes it clear that Gawain is consenting in dishonestly accepting the girdle. Words like “thulged” and “tholed” show his encouragement of the lady's argumentative persistence rather than any discouragement of it. His initial declining of her gifts was aligned with standards of chivalric behavior, for he could not take a gift from the lady without it having some significance as a love token, and he could not honorably accept her love.

In the green chapel, for a second time, Gawain fails to behave chivalrously when he flinches from the first blow. This failing is not simply that Gawain does not show bravery in accepting the blow but that, by flinching, he is breaking his word to the Green

Knight, given both a year previously and a few minutes previously, not to resist the blow in any way. Because his actions do not match his words, his behavior is unchivalric. The moment of transformation for Gawain is not when he receives the strike from the Green Knight, but rather when the Knight explains to Gawain his lack of honor: “lewté yow wonted [you were wanting in good faith]” (2366). It is then that Gawain recognizes his faults, admits them, and overcomes them, transforming him into a knight of improved behavioral chivalry. Gawain tells the Green Knight, “Corsed worth cowarddyse and covetyse bothe!/ In yow is vylany and vyse that virtue disstryez [Cursed be both cowardice and coventousness! In you is degeneracy and vice, which destroy virtue]” (2374-75), which shows his acceptance of responsibility for his shortcomings and demonstrates an awareness of how they detract from true chivalry. His point here is that these qualities are anti-chivalric on their own and lead to the deterioration of other chivalric values such as honesty.

While Gawain’s speech about chivalric virtues shows a basic level of transformation, his actions demonstrate that he has been transformed on a deeper level. After his discussion of the virtues, he offers to let the Green Knight deal him the blow again—this time without the protection of the girdle. Gawain’s behavior finally aligns with the chivalric expectations for knights because he is willing to uphold honestly his end of the agreement with the Green Knight. In this moment, the two elements of Gawain’s moral transformation, religious and behavioral chivalry, come together as he confesses his sins and offers to behave chivalrously. The Green Knight tells Gawain, “Thou art confessed so clene, beknownen of thy mysses,/ And hatz the penaunce apert of

the point of myn egge [You are confessed so clean, your offences acknowledged, and have had penance plainly from the point of my blade]" (2391-92). Gawain's new and established forms of chivalry coincide in this moment. Religious chivalry is present in both lines, noticeable in the words "confessed" and "penaunce"; verbal chivalry is in the first line with Gawain's adamant dismissal of cowardice and covetousness as well as his revelation of his actions; and behavioral chivalry is shown in the second line because Gawain has accepted the knight's strike and has been marked by the axe's blade as he'd agreed. In addition to the physical mark that Gawain is given by the Green Knight, he willingly accepts the green girdle as a constantly visible marker of his failure and shame.

Part IV: Shedding Individual Otherness and Spurring Societal Transformation

Upon his return to Arthur's court, Gawain is welcomed back by the courtiers, yet his aura of otherness remains until Arthur and the court are able to incorporate Gawain's marker of otherness into the normal traditions of the court, thus allowing Gawain to shed his otherness and be reintegrated. This reintegration of Gawain involves a transformation of the court as well. The narrator tells of Gawain's return:

Ther wakned wle in that wone when wyst the grete  
 Tat gode Gawayn watz comen; gayn hit hym thought.  
 The kyng kisses the knyht, and the whene alce,  
 And sythen mony syker knight that soght hym to haylce,  
 Of his fare that hym frayned; and ferlyly he telles,  
 Biknowez alle the costes of care that he hade,  
 The chaunce of the chapel, the chere of the knight,  
 The luf of the ladi, the lace at the last.  
 The nirt in the neck he naked hem schewed  
 That he light for his unleuté at the leudes hondes  
     for blame.  
     He tened quen he schulde telle,  
     He groned for gref and grame;  
     The blod in his face con melle,  
     When he hit schulde schewe, for schame.

[Joy awoke in that dwelling when the nobles learned that good Gawain had come; it seemed excellent to them. The king kisses the knight, and the queen also, and then many a trustworthy knight who came to greet him, who asked him about his journey; and he tells his amazing story, confesses all the hardships that he had, the episode in the chapel, the behavior of the knight, the wooing of the lady, finally the belt. He laid bare to them the nick in his neck, which he received at the knight's hands as a reproof for his faithlessness. He suffered torment when he had to tell; he groaned for grief and vexation. The blood flowed into his face, for shame, when he had to reveal it.] (2490-2504)

In comparison with Arthur's request for a *tale* at the outset of the poem, the language of this passage emphasizes the honesty and reality of Gawain's narrative. Because Arthur's

request for a tale and Gawain's recounting of his adventures at the end of the poem bookend the text, it is natural to draw a comparison between the two. This passage does not use the word "tale," but it does use other words with connotations suggesting that this account of adventures and marvels is more realistic than a tale. The verb "telles"<sup>15</sup> implies that Gawain is relating true information, not embellished or made more marvelous for entertainment, and the term "biknowez"<sup>16</sup> refers to revelations, admissions, or confessions, all of which are associated with honesty. Gawain's honesty about his experiences at the end of the poem represents a more realistic Camelot than was presented at the beginning of the poem when the ideal form of narrative was a tale rather than a confession.

The terminology of confession or admission also demonstrates how Gawain must pass one final test in order to be accepted back into the society—he must reveal his failures to all and risk being rejected for them. Scholars Juliet Vale and Malcolm Vale discuss the important role of piety in chivalry, and piety appears in Gawain's process of shedding his otherness. Gawain views himself as an other due to his chivalric failures of breaking the exchange-of-winnings agreement and seeking to escape from his agreement with the Green Knight to receive a blow, so it makes sense that it is through the chivalric act of honestly confessing what he considers to be his sins that he is able to allow himself to be accepted back into the folds of chivalric courtly society. Gawain's guilt over his failure to uphold chivalric ideals pushes him to confess his shortcomings, which is

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<sup>15</sup> The *Middle English Dictionary* cites *telles* as a form of the headword *tellen* (v.) meaning, "to tell a story aloud, relate an event" (2a); "to speak of" (1a); or "to make disclosure" (5).

<sup>16</sup> This term comes from the headword *biknouen* (v.) meaning "to make known, reveal, confess" (2).

necessary for the court to take the steps of adopting the green girdle as part of the courtly traditions and ultimately reintegrating Gawain. His confession is the act of a chivalric knight, and it reinforces to the courtiers that his experience with magic has left him human rather than supernatural.

It is notable that throughout his return, Gawain is not treated by King Arthur's court as a frightening other, although he is fascinating. It is said "and ferlyly he telles" (line 2494). The term "ferlile," another spelling of "ferlyly", is defined as "marvelous" and "ferlili" means "to tell of marvelous things."<sup>17</sup> This suggests that not only was Gawain's story full of marvels, but the act of his storytelling was also a marvel. This description of the marvelous was also used to characterize the Green Knight when he first appeared in the court (233, 239). This reuse of the same descriptive terminology suggests an association between the court's understanding of Gawain upon his return and of the Green Knight upon his arrival. Although Gawain is still in a state of otherness, it is more self-imposed than society-imposed, as evidenced by their glad welcoming of him back into court. Unlike the Green Knight, whose physical attributes were frightening because of their non-human appearance, Gawain appears completely human, which reduces the court's fear of him but not their fascination with him.

This scene shows Gawain beginning to become reintegrated into society, yet he still is associated with magic, and thus remains an other—if only in his own eyes. Gawain gets accepted back into society through the court's decision for all knights to take on the same aspect that would otherwise maintain Gawain's otherness—the green girdle.

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<sup>17</sup> This definition is provided by the *Middle English Dictionary*.

During the course of his journey to fulfill his agreement with the Green Knight, Gawain makes use of a magical object—the green girdle—to save his life; upon his return to the court, he is the owner of this object (having been given it by the Green Knight).

His shame at having used the girdle to protect himself demonstrates how he sees himself apart from the court, for if he felt this was acceptable behavior for a knight of King Arthur's court, he would not have blushed. Although Gawain sees his physical scar as a source of shame, the physical marking does not get mentioned again after this passage. A scar would not have distinguished Gawain in any particular way from other knights, as many of them would have scars from injuries obtained either in battle or training as knights. Although Gawain sees himself as an other and there is the potential of him remaining an other because of the girdle he has, King Arthur and the court are so happy to have Gawain return to the court alive that they take measures to reintegrate him back into society.

Gawain's speech about cowardice shows that, due to his failure, he does not consider himself a chivalric or honorable knight. Although Bertilak comforts him and says that he is a good knight, Gawain's shame when recounting his activities to the court is reminiscent of his shame when his dishonest behavior was first brought to light: "Alle the blod of his brest blende in his face/ That al he schranke for schome that the schalk talked [All the blood from his breast suffused his face, so that he shrank for shame at what the man said]" (2371-72) and "The blod in his face con melle/ When he hit schulde schewe, for schame [The blood flowed into his face, for shame, when he had to reveal it]" (2503-04). Both descriptions highlight similar emotional responses on Gawain's

part: he blushes heavily and feels deep shame at his actions. Gawain's shame is so strong that he self-inflicts the punishment of always bearing the green girdle as a marker, despite both Bertilak and the court's willingness to forgive him completely. The ability of Gawain simply to return to the court is complicated by his recognition of himself as an other as well as his refusal to let go of the experiences that make him an other. Gawain says, "For mon may hyden his harme, bot unhap ne may hit,/ For ther hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit never [For one may conceal one's offence but one cannot remove it for where it is once attached it will never be separated]" (2511-12), showing his understanding that he has been transformed by his experiences and thus cannot merely hide or forget them.

Because of the magical associations of the green girdle, it would set him apart from the other knights—a marker that demonstrates his experience with magic. This green fabric symbol maintains his position as an other in the court—a knight to whom the society cannot relate because of his experiences with magic. The magical surrounding these experiences is important; because many knights would have engaged in battles or duels, the magical nature of Gawain's quest makes it different from what an average knight of the court would have experienced. As previously discussed, the court's acquaintance with marvels was mainly through stories rather than personal encounters, so not only would the magical element of Gawain's experience be a factor in his otherness but the reality of his encounter in contrast to the fictional nature of the tales would also contribute.



Because Gawain vows always to wear the green girdle, which would keep him associated with magic, the only way for him to become part of the primary society once again is for the magical element that would set him apart as an other to become a norm for the court. Gawain's experience with magic and his subsequent moral transformation contribute to his decision to wear the green girdle continually and thus further the society's transformation. It is the problem resulting from Gawain's choice to continue to wear the magical green girdle that causes a change in King Arthur's court. The first change is quite tactile—every knight and lady decides to wear a similar green belt so as to make it the norm, which allows Gawain to be accepted among them again rather than remaining set apart by his continued association with magic. It is only this decision by all the court to wear a marker of green that reverses the development of Gawain's otherness. By having all lords and ladies bear this marker of otherness, Arthur transforms Gawain's otherness into part of the accepted court traditions. The second change is ethical as the court develops a better understanding of the meaning of chivalry and knighthood. The court's acceptance of the green girdle into their customs shows how the society domesticated magic by incorporating the item associated with it and altering its symbolism to represent a chivalric value.

Camelot is transformed because it is no longer devoid of brave knights, and it has moved to realign its reality with the chivalric characteristics for which it was known. This transformation is only completed through Gawain's process of becoming an other temporarily and then returning to the court where he is reintegrated. The initial scene in the court showed a lack of bravery amongst the knights, yet Gawain's acceptance of the

challenge and eventual return to the court is a rehabilitation of bravery in Arthur's court. The concluding passage of the poem shows that the court has recognized the realities of chivalry rather than idealizing chivalry as an abstract concept. As I discussed earlier, the court initially liked the imitation of chivalry but was appalled at the realities of it. The courtiers' acceptance of the green girdle into their traditions shows a shift in their own understanding of chivalry as not just an idealistic code, but a code with real life or death consequences.

Sarah McNamer argues that the green girdle is a symbol of valuing love of one's life, and that the court's adoption of this symbol at the conclusion of the poem is a signal of changing values in medieval society (255-56). Although McNamer does not go so far as to claim that this acceptance represents a replacement of chivalry, she says, "the greenness of loving one's life tempers the gold rigid chivalric *troth*" (256). While I agree with her underlying assertion that the court's acceptance of the girdle is a signal of larger social transformation, I see the girdle less as a symbol of valuing love of one's own life than as a symbol of the shame of doing so. Gawain's acceptance of the girdle was accompanied by his speech on how wrong it was for him to have shown concern for his own life at the cost of upholding his *troth*. Gawain provides the poem's audience with a reading of the girdle's symbolic meaning when he says, "Bot in syngene of my surfet I schal se hit ofte,/ When I ride inrenoun, remorde tomyselven/ The faut and the fayntyse of the flesche crabbed/ How tender hit is to entyse teches of fylthe [But I shall often see it as a sign of my transgression, when I ride in honour lament to myself the sinfulness and the fallibility of the perverse flesh, how liable it is to catch blemishes of sin]" (2433-36).

Regardless of the Green Knight's intentions or hopes for the girdle's future symbolism, Gawain's own guide for interpreting the girdle tells us that it will survive as a symbol of his failure to uphold the chivalric ideal. Since, in this version of the poem, the Green Knight does not rejoin Arthur's court, only Gawain's interpretation of the symbol is available to be passed on to the courtiers upon his return.

At the end of the poem, the court has learned the important lesson about chivalry: that it involves action rather than imitation of the chivalric ideal for a knight. This is shown when the court accepts the symbol of the green girdle and the courtiers make it a standard part of what is considered honorable. The green girdle serves as a symbol of a real chivalric experience, and by making this a part of the Round Table's "renoun," the court is recognizing the importance of honest, first-hand experience—including the danger of death—as part of chivalry.

After accepting the girdle as part of courtly traditions, Camelot's knights have a deeper understanding of chivalry, which is shown through their open acceptance of a symbol that reminds them of the chivalric values that they should uphold as knights. The poem explains that "he honored that hit hade evermore after [he was honoured who had it [the bauderyk], for ever after]" (2520), showing that the courtiers were honorable. The narrator's statement that this claim of honor and chivalry is set in the "best boke of romaunce [best book of romance]" (2521) gives credibility to the honorable nature of the court at the poem's close because the court's restored reputation is written in the *best* romances, not just the common romance stories. The reference to the prevalence of the

court's restored chivalrous nature in elite and elegant romances also lends integrity to the claim.

Rhonda Knight opposes the idea that the poem's ending signals any real transformation of the society. Approaching the text with an eye for Gawain's role in the English-Welsh cultural relations of the poem, she first argues:

His experiences at Bertilak's court give Gawain the insight to examine the foundations of this [metropolitan] identity. He comes to see and understand the disjunctions and incompatibilities between all of the identity fragments in his own cultural collage, which he signals in his adoption of the green girdle. Gawain brings home a piece of the Anglo-Welsh border culture and makes it a part of himself....By wearing the girdle, he expresses his desire to incorporate his experience of the border into his identity collage. (282)

Knight's argument here, although referring to cultural/national identity, is similar to my own argument about Gawain's return. We agree that Gawain's experiences with Bertilak/the Green Knight transformed Gawain's identity. Knight foregrounds the foreign culture aspect of the experience while my own reading focuses on the magical elements of the experience.

However, Knight sees the courtiers' integration of the girdle into their culture not as removing Gawain's otherness from him and reintegrating him into the society but as "consum[ing]" a "commodity" (283). She argues that the courtiers' consumption of the girdle shows that they cannot integrate any new knowledge or practices into their own

culture with any real change. She argues that “Camelot is quick to deem objects and persons as ‘other’ and then to try to absorb them and invest them with new meaning, rendering them safe and consumable...[but] the court does not incorporate the knowledge that comes with these objects, persons, and encounters. They remain as blissfully solipsistic as they were in the opening of the poem” (283-84). At this point in her argument my interpretation parts ways from hers. While the court is joyous and laughing as they all agree to wear the green girdle like Gawain, this behavior stems from their pleasure at his unexpected return to them rather than ignorant consumption. The poem says that directly after Gawain’s shameful admission,

The kyng confortez the knyght, and alle the court als  
Laghen loude thereat, and luflyly acorden  
That lords and ladis that longed to the Table,  
Uche burne of the brotherhede, a bauderyk schulde have,  
A bende abelef hym aboute of a bright grene,  
And that, for sake of that segge, in swete to were.

[The king comforts the knight, and all the court laugh loudly at that and agree in a friendly manner that lords and knights who belonged to the Table, each man of the brotherhood, should have a baldric, a ribbon about him diagonally, of a bright green, and wear it in the same manner, for the sake of that knight.] (2513-18)

This passage shows that the court’s choice to wear the girdle as a symbol is not based in some form of consumption, for there is no language of wonderment at the fashion of the *bauderyk*, just a desire to include Gawain back into the court. There is also no mention of the courtiers wanting to have any part of the other culture, and it is explicitly stated that their adoption of this symbol is done “for the sake of that segge,” Gawain.

If the acceptance of the girdle was an act of consumption by the court, rather than an indication of societal transformation, then it would not make sense that the poem

concludes this scene by saying that all who wore the green belt after this point were honored (2520). The honor associated with wearing the green belt comes not simply from being recognized as a member of the, once again, chivalrous Camelot court, but also from representing the values that the green girdle symbolized to Gawain.

## Conclusion

The transformational otherness in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is comparable to other medieval texts such as *Sir Orfeo* or *The Canterbury Tales*. In *Sir Orfeo*, the king himself becomes an other as he leaves his kingdom to go in search of his wife who has been forcefully taken by fairies. While this text has less of a moral transformation, there is certainly a positive transformation for the court as the kingdom's future is secured by Sir Orfeo's return, when he finds his regent still loyal and selects him as successor. Similar to the role magic plays in *SGGK*, magic in *Sir Orfeo* is a catalyst for the transformation or indirectly causes it. Although the fairies do not cast spells or even have the intention of improving the kingdom, such as could be argued about *SGGK*, the magical event of the fairy kidnapping of Queen Heurodis and Sir Orfeo's subsequent decision to engage the magic that has interfered in his non-magical court are what set into motion the sequence of events that lead to societal improvement.

In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, again a knight leaves the kingdom as an other, in a potentially more distinct state of otherness than is shown in either *SGGK* or *Sir Orfeo*, and undergoes a transformation through his experience. Whereas magic was the instigator of the events in the other two texts, magic directly affects the knight's transformation in this Arthurian romance because the elf queen is carefully teaching the knight a lesson about chivalrous behavior towards women.

Although the employment of transformational otherness is carried out in a variety of ways and for a variety of narrative purposes, it extends through a wide array of medieval romances, suggesting that magic in romances plays a role beyond functioning

as entertainment in the narrative. Magic is also functioning as a narrative device that moves the narrative forward, and it is key to developing a happy ending. Considering the function of magic within medieval texts is important to the broader critical conversation of medieval literature; magic has long been recognized as a staple in medieval romances, but not considered for its significance within the romances. Examining transformational otherness and the role that magic plays in it could open up many new paths for literary critics to explore in the future.



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**Magic, Muggles, and Mudbloods: Examining Magical Otherness in J.K. Rowling's  
*Harry Potter* Series**

Introduction

The seven book popular phenomenon that was J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series has captured the attention of literary scholars, making them question why the books are so popular, what lessons do they pass to the reader, and how the thousands of pages in the series address issues such as race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and sexuality. This article will explore how Rowling uses the issue of blood status in her books as a way of addressing cultural otherness. Many critics have equated blood status in the books with racism and have argued that the main character's quest is centered on fighting racism. While there are many overt parallels between these two forms of prejudice, I examine blood status in *Harry Potter* as a more nuanced form of racism, one that centers on cultural otherness rather than appearance. While racism's frequent reliance on physical appearance to distinguish the other is a manifestation of cultural otherness, I will be looking at the way blood status functions as a more extreme form of racism because of its inability to be recognized through physical appearance.

In the series, Harry, a half-blood wizard fights against Voldemort, a dark wizard who killed Harry's parents and whose body was destroyed when he attempted to kill Harry (who was a baby and protected by the sacrifice of his mother). Harry, who was raised by his magic-hating aunt and uncle; Hermione, a Muggle-born witch; and Ron, a pure-blood wizard from a Muggle loving family considered blood-traitors by pureblood ideologists, band together to fight Voldemort and his vision of a pureblood Wizarding world in which Muggle-borns are not allowed and Muggles are ruled by wizards and

witches. In the first book, the three friends go to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for the first time; it is here that they learn magic and, throughout the course of the year, discover and defeat a plot by Voldemort to steal the Sorcerer's Stone, which would allow him to live forever. In the second book, tensions about blood status heat up as the Chamber of Secrets, a legendary chamber said to hold the monster of Slytherin is opened and Muggle-borns are attacked. This book introduces readers to the term "Mudblood," which Ron explains as "a really foul name for someone who is Muggle-born...Dirty-blood...Common blood" (*Chamber of Secrets* 115-116). The encounter, in this book, between Harry and the memory-come-to-life version of Voldemort's sixteen year old self reveals Voldemort's own half-blood parentage and hatred of his Muggle lineage. In the third book, the only one in which Voldemort or his followers do not physically appear, Harry learns the truth about his parents' old friend Sirius Black, an escaped convicted murderer, and Harry helps to save Sirius's life, although Peter Pettigrew, the man who betrayed Harry's parents to Voldemort gets away and sets out to find and help Voldemort. In the fourth book, the Triwizard Tournament is held at Hogwarts and Harry is unwillingly entered and selected as a competitor. He goes through a series of challenges, leading up to his unplanned transport to a graveyard in which Peter Pettigrew performs an ancient ritual of dark magic to restore Voldemort. After a battle between Harry and the reborn Voldemort, Harry escapes and informs everyone that Voldemort has returned.

Institutionalized discrimination and hatred based on blood status is brought to light in the fifth book through the character of Dolores Umbridge, a Ministry of Magic

employee who despises half-breeds and who is Hogwarts' new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. At the same time that Harry, Hermione, and Ron are fighting Umbridge's prejudices at Hogwarts, the power and influence of Voldemort is growing. The book leads up to a fight between some Hogwarts students and some Death Eaters, followers of Voldemort, and the tragic death of Sirius Black. The sixth book reveals Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore's theory that Voldemort has created six horcruxes, items in which one stores a piece of their soul, in order to make himself invincible. As Harry and Dumbledore journey through memories of Voldemort's life, including his half-blood parentage and hatred of his Muggle father, they begin to map out what must be done to defeat Voldemort. The book concludes with a large battle within Hogwarts between Death Eaters and members of the Order of the Pheonix, a group who actively resist Voldemort. The book also includes Dumbledore's death at the hands of Severus Snape, a Death Eater who was supposed to be a spy helping the Order. The final book puts Harry, Ron, and Hermione on the run and hunting horcruxes as Voldemort has taken over the Ministry of Magic. Blood status discrimination is everywhere as Muggle-borns are required to register with the Ministry and to give up their wands. The series ends with Harry's willing sacrifice of his life at Voldemort's hands, Harry's return to life, and a dual between Harry and Voldemort in which Voldemort's killing curse rebounds and kills him permanently as all the horcruxes have been previously destroyed.

The tensions surrounding blood purity and status evolve throughout the series. Blood status is indirectly mentioned in the first book as we see Draco Malfoy, a pureblood wizard in Harry's class, exhibit a superior attitude. The introduction of the

term “Mudblood” and the focus of the attacks on Muggle-borns in the second book highlights the blood purity issues in the Wizarding world, but still portrays it as both an ancient attitude held by Salazar Slytherin and one that is upheld by Death Eaters. Hermione’s activism for house-elf rights in the fourth book introduces a thin connection between the pureblood ideology’s treatment of Muggle-borns and the institutionalized regulation and treatment of magical creatures. In *Order of the Phoenix*, Umbridge’s attitude towards half-breeds ramps up this tension even further. By the sixth book, we see Muggles being targeted for random killings by Death Eaters and the very title of the book, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, foregrounds the tension surrounding blood status. By the time the series reaches its concluding text, the discriminatory attitudes that have evolved into targeted acts of violence finally become institutionalized regulation in the form of committees, laws, and publications by the Ministry of Magic.

Literary critics working with the *Harry Potter* series have explored a wide range of topics, often in an attempt to understand the texts’ popularity and their roles in the larger history of children’s literature. Some of the popular topics have centered on the text’s pedagogical opportunities<sup>18</sup>, treatment of child development and identity<sup>19</sup>, and literary influences<sup>20</sup>. While some critics have specifically focused on the role of otherness in *Harry Potter*, this topic has mostly been addressed with attention given to

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<sup>18</sup> Due to the choices of some public schools to ban the book and some university’s to teach the texts, this has become a frequently addressed topic for literary critics such as Tison Pugh, David L. Wallace, Rebecca Stephens, and Laura Baker Shearer.

<sup>19</sup> Some critics who have written on this topic include William Wandless, Steve Barfield, Leigh A. Neithardt, and Lisa Damour.

<sup>20</sup> Often incorporated into other arguments as support, this topic has also garnered its own set of critical work by scholars such as Alice Mills, Karen Manners Smith, Elaine Ostry, Ximena Gallardo-C., C. Jason Smith, and John Granger.

one of the previous mentioned issues—race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and sexuality. Additionally, otherness has been looked at through many different lenses—legal, moral, ideological, and historical. My own argument examines the public ideology of the Wizarding world and its consequences. The discussion opened up by blood status in the series can cast light on the way a discriminatory attitude if left unchecked can develop into a much more extreme form of acting against the other. Rowling's choice to manifest otherness through blood purity allows readers to draw on their contextual knowledge of racism to understand the otherness of Muggles and Muggle-borns, but blood purity is also distinct enough from racism to provide opportunities to open more general discussions about otherness and discrimination.

Tison Pugh and David L. Wallace claim that the work's pedagogical usefulness lies in “inviting them [students] to engage with cultural conversations of social class, gender, sexuality, and race” (97), as well as sexual orientation (99). Pugh and Wallace's development of how race could be addressed in the series folds in two different perspectives and interpretations of the role of race in the texts. They first discuss the role of race directly, saying that a discussion of the whiteness of the main characters and the lack of issues surrounding interracial interactions suggests a post-racial world (99). Their second perspective on the issue examines the social status of magical creatures as a parallel to race (99-100). Both of these perspectives, as well as the discussions of the other issues they raise, ignore the main tension of otherness in the series—that of blood status. While this article was published months prior to the release of the final book,

there is a significant address of the problems of blood status within the Wizarding world in books one through six to warrant its own address.

Jackie C. Horne argues that Rowling calls upon two “intellectual traditions of antiracism education...to show both her protagonists and her readers how to approach the challenging task of fighting racism” (76). This conclusion relies on the assumption that the reader is meant to interpret blood status as racism; however, the presence of racial difference in the books (apart from differences in blood status) suggests that race already occupies a distinctive position in the series. Although there are undeniably interesting parallels between blood status and racism, I challenge the assertion that blood status in the books is a direct stand-in for racism, which is too general of a label for what blood status represents.

Many critics work from the basis of this assumption that blood status is an equivalent of racism in the text, yet they also want to explore the way Rowling represents different races within her text. This overlap suggests to me that blood status has a meaning beyond being a surrogate for racist discrimination. Whereas racism and ethnic hatred tend to rely of physical indications of otherness, whether skin color or the more finite details outlines in Eugenics handbooks, blood status is not discernible from a witch or wizard’s appearance. This makes it a more nuanced and extreme form of otherness in that it is more threatening to the Subject community because the other is often indistinguishable from the Subject.

In Jacques Lacan’s theory of otherness, the other “resembles the self,” and this is crucial in “defining the identity of the subject” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 155). This



becomes particularly important when considering Voldemort's hatred of Muggles and Muggle-borns because half his lineage is Muggle. Kate Behr provides a pathway into this discussion through her article discussing transformation and cultures in *Harry Potter*. She explains that the Muggle world, although completely familiar to readers is refreshed as they see it through new eyes (121). Focusing on the theme of "same-as-difference," Behr points out the ways in which the Wizarding world and Muggle world physically overlap without the two cultures ever truly developing an accurate awareness of each other (122). Behr presents an interesting discussion on the way in which the two worlds parallel each other, and she delves into revealing moments of the text in which the two cultures come into contact with each other. My argument expands upon Behr's ingress into this topic when she says "Rowling shows us wizards treating Muggles much as the colonists treated the natives" (125). Behr also infers a connection between blood status and "ethnic hatred" (125), leading her to consider the blood prejudice of pureblooded wizards as a commentary on the ethnic hatred such as the colonists had towards the natives.

While my argument aligns quite closely with Behr's, we diverge on several points, the most significant being the difference between the treatment of blood status in *Harry Potter* and ethnic hatred. Ethnic hatred is usually spurred by an awareness of an ethnic other based on physical appearance; this is why so much concern about "passing," the ability to pass oneself off as being of a different (usually the dominant) ethnic or racial group, was historically present after the abolition of slavery in the United States. Because blood status is something only discernible through knowledge of one's family

tree, it should be considered different than ethnicity. Although a Muggle-born new to the Wizarding world would likely be easy to pick out because of his or her reactions, there is no physical characteristic that distinguishes Muggle-borns from half-blood and pureblood wizards. However, like ethnicity, the anxiety of the Wizarding world about magic lies in the question of genealogy—the presence of Muggle-borns is frightening, in part, because they are proof that magic is not just hereditary. The treatment of Squibs, the rare individuals born without magical ability but to magical families, as pitiable and occasionally humorous, show that although they too provide evidence against the pureblood belief that magic is or should be purely hereditary, the unusualness of squibs compared to Muggle-borns (*Chamber of Secrets* 145) and their loss of magical ability rather than gaining of it makes them less of a threat to Wizarding society.

I argue that Rowling presents a text which explores the ways otherness plays out in the public realm, first through public ideology and then through action upon that ideology. I examine blood purity as an extreme form of threatening otherness because of the other's lack of physical identifiers indicating one's otherness. Although Rowling is exploring these ideas and promotes the defeat of the discrimination, her ending remains problematic, for it promotes assimilation over acculturation. This move promotes rather than discourages the existence and maintenance of public ideologies of otherness.

This is an issue that has previously been touched upon by critics, one of whom is Elaine Ostry, who argues that Rowling uses fairy tale themes and motifs to put forth a social agenda of “combat[ing] two evils of our time: materialism and racism” (89). Ostry goes on to claim that Rowling's agenda is hindered by the contradictions within the

text between being “radical and traditional” (90). While I concur with Ostry’s opinion on the contradictions and complexities of Rowling’s texts, I diverge from Ostry’s argument when she conflates blood status and race, moving smoothly between the two and discussing them both as representations of how Rowling is handling racial difference as a theme. Her argument begins by assuming that blood status is the text’s representation of racial difference, but later she accuses Rowling of “colorblindness” for making the main characters be white (90). Ostry seems to overlook the more finite level of ethnicity that Rowling works into her text by incorporating not only characters of multiple non-white ethnicities, but also a variety of white ethnicities such as Irish and Scottish, as represented by Seamus Finnegan and Minerva McGonagall. What is more troubling to me about Ostry’s argument is that her conflation of blood status and racial difference in the text results in a dismissal of an opportunity to examine blood status as a more extreme and complicated form of otherness.

Part I: Locating Otherness in *Harry Potter*

The *Harry Potter* series breaks free from the traditional understanding of otherness as one (dominant) subject projecting their fear and fascination onto the (inferior) other. By moving between the magical and Muggle worlds throughout the series, Rowling is able to show the way in which Muggles who are aware of the magical world and Wizards view each other as the other. However, the complexities of otherness in the series go deeper as we explore the fluidity with which a Muggle-born witch or wizard can traverse the two worlds, moving between them, ultimately giving them access to both worlds and making them an other in both worlds. Hermione is the most developed, but certainly not solitary, example of this. Other characters provide brief glimpses into the benefits and challenges of belonging to two worlds. Dean Thomas struggles to adjust to the small differences in the Wizarding world, such as pictures in which the subjects can move and interact with people outside of their own frames, yet in the fifth book, Dean points out that he didn't have to deal with his parents worrying over deaths at Hogwarts because as Muggles they don't know what is happening in the magical world and he's "not stupid enough to tell them" (*Order of the Phoenix* 219). This small moment in the book illustrates the broad gap that exists between the Muggle and Wizarding worlds and the careful navigation that Muggle-born witches and wizards must employ to inhabit both of the worlds.

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series portrays two sides of otherness—unlike the post-colonial theories of the Other, in which there is a clear dominant/oppressed distinction, Rowling presents a world in which Muggles are both the Other and the

Subject, as are witches and wizards. Despite this two-way otherness, Rowling's ultimate address of this theme fails to break completely free of the post-colonial distinction.

Within the magical community, Mudbloods and magical creatures share a similar position as regulated groups other under pureblood ideology. Similar to how the post-colonial combination of the cannibal, savage, primitive, and other "came to play an important part in the moral justification for imperial rule" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 27), the *Potter* series demonstrates how these same concepts are used in the justification for oppressing Muggle-borns. A careful examination of the pureblood ideology rhetoric used, particularly in *Deathly Hallows*, reveals a line of thinking similar to the post-colonial moral justification.

Voldemort's pride in magical blood and hatred of Muggle (non-magical) blood stem from his fear of and fascination with Muggles. While his fascination is not of a pleasant sort, such as that Arthur Weasley displays, Voldemort does indeed have a fascination with Muggles because of his obsession with them. In *Deathly Hallows*, his agenda is revealed and reinforced as being about eliminating all Muggle influence from the Wizarding world rather than simply gaining personal power over the Wizarding world. This is clear from the fact that after taking over the Ministry of Magic, rather than simply focusing on eliminating Harry, the only known significant threat to Voldemort's retention of his newly gained power, he wages an entire campaign against Muggles and Muggle-born witches and wizards. The direction of Voldemort's attention and efforts reveals his true interests and desires.

Although the pureblood ideology and Voldemort's personal reign of hatred openly constructs Muggles as the other, it is Muggle-born witches and wizards that are the real target of otherness. Their ability to straddle both worlds makes them a bigger perceived threat than the Muggles. This transgressive ability is the underlying commonality of all the regulated, scorned, and oppressed demographic groups in the *Harry Potter* series, including Muggle-borns, house elves, goblins, and giants. Rowling's use of this theme in children's literature presents an opportunity to hold open public discussions about these issues that have been central in Western culture since colonialism. Drawing on medieval romance traditions, Rowling flips many of them on their head by positioning her narrative within a magical world and frequently construing the Muggle world as the Otherworld. Unlike medieval romances however, the *Potter* series provides many opportunities to enter the Otherworld and witness both the magical and non-magical perspectives. This creates a certain level of discomfort for the reader because while they want to envision themselves as part of the Subject society—the magical world—Rowling's use of realistic Britain as the Muggle world forces readers to also associate themselves with the Muggles, the other in the narrative.

Because the Muggle world in the books parallels the real world of the western readers, the readers cannot help but identify with the Muggles in the narrative. As it is human impulse to want to identify as part of the Subject culture rather than the Other culture, the unavoidable identification of the reader to the Muggles, who are the other, is uncomfortable and provides an inlet for critical thinking and discourse surrounding the topic of otherness. One reason that readers are so invested in the success of Harry, Ron,

and Hermione is that their quest to defeat Voldemort is a quest to redefine societal positions and integrate Muggle-borns and Muggle culture into the Wizarding world in a way that removes their otherness.

Of the three main characters—Ron, Harry, and Hermione—each of the three possible blood statuses are represented. Ron is a pureblood wizard, Harry a half-blood, and Hermione a Muggle-born. Hermione's position as a Muggle-born and one of the three main characters helps Rowling's text to highlight the strange uncomfortable feeling caused when the pureblood ideology casts British Muggle culture, the culture in which we as readers most identify, as the Otherworld. My argument frequently addresses Hermione's character as she is the Muggle-born who is given the most page-space in the text and many factors of her character compound and intersect, making her into an ultimate other.

Hermione's character not only represents the other in the pureblood ideology, but carries with it the centuries long association between women and otherness. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a majority of prosecution of witchcraft was directed at women as they were more commonly associated with and persecuted for practicing magic. Discussing medieval romances, Saunders writes, "In the archetypal figure of the witch, magic and the feminine intersect in a monstrous version of the predatory and transgressive woman" (27).

Hermione is continuously portrayed as a know-it-all, an overachiever, her "predatory" nature is for knowledge and academic achievement. She also fulfills the bill for being a "transgressive woman" because of her Muggle-born blood status which positions her as

crossing boundaries between the Muggle and magical worlds, a boundary transgression that becomes illegal under Voldemort's reign.

As the sole female in the group of the three heroes, her femininity also works to make her into an other even within her group of closest friends. Ron and Harry frequently share stereotypical masculine interests from which Hermione is excluded, sometimes willingly and sometimes unwillingly. One example of this is when the three characters go through puberty and begin to express interest in the opposite sex; during *Goblet of Fire*, Ron and Harry have several brief exchanges about girls they are romantically interested in, yet Hermione cannot share her love interests with the boys. These three elements of Hermione's character—being Muggle-born, being female, and being intellectual—intersect in a way that increases Hermione's otherness. Because of her intellectualism, she is often not perceived as being feminine, as is implied in *Goblet of the Fire* when Ron and Harry don't consider her as a possible option when deciding who they will ask to the school ball. Because she is a Muggle-born, it is expected that she will be unfamiliar and unknowledgeable about the Wizarding world like other Muggle-borns are, yet her intellectualism sets her apart because she is an other within the Wizarding world who knows more about the Wizarding world and magic than many, if not most, of the half-blood and pureblood students at Hogwarts. Although the connection between Hermione's femininity and Muggle-born status is less obvious in the text, the tradition of associating women with witchcraft, which was the practice of the other in the Middle Ages, is paralleled in Rowling's work by her choice to make the Muggle-born of the group of heroes be the female of the group.



Within the Wizarding World, the pureblood ideology casts Muggles and Muggle-borns as others and then uses this status to oppress them in times when the ideology flourishes. Surveying the series as a whole, a clear distinction can be seen between the first four books and the last three books. Several significant events contribute to this shift—Voldemort’s return to physical form and power at the end of the fourth book and the significant increase in the text’s address of the otherness and regulation of magical beings and creatures, who are viewed as below half-blood and pure-blood wizards. The concern over blood purity is a driving element in the pureblood ideology and harkens to the audience’s knowledge of racism and colonial concerns about racial purity.

Despite this parallel and Rowling’s choice to end the series with good (those who believe in equality) overcoming evil (those who promote discrimination), her text provides only a surface level address of the issue of discrimination and otherness. The epilogue and events throughout the narrative suggest that, overall, Rowling’s text contributes to the promotion of assimilation of the other rather than acculturation. There are some moments that are open to experimenting with acculturation, although the results of these attempts are mixed. Acculturation is the two-way process of exchanging culture when multiple cultural groups come into contact. Although research on acculturation has largely centered on the way it affects the minority group, anthropologist Franz Boas held the position that everyone experiences acculturation; he said, “It is not too much to say that there is no people whose customs have developed uninfluenced by foreign culture, that has not borrowed arts and ideas which it has developed in its own way” (Boas 631-

32). Rowling's text however shows little, if any, exchange of cultural customs between the Muggle and magical cultures.

## Part II: The Otherness of the Subject: Magic Through the Eyes of Muggles

Because the only Muggles who are aware of the other culture existing are those who are related to a witch or wizard, it is perhaps easier to dismiss the lack of acculturation on the part of Muggles, although we are still able to examine the choice of a few sample Muggles who are aware of magic. While the first Muggles the reader sees are highly anti-magic, Rowling sows the seeds of sympathy for Muggles right away and nurtures those seeds so that by the end of the series, the extremity of the final battle to protect Muggles and Muggle-borns feels more than justified. Rowling presents Muggles with an anti-magic public ideology that mirrors the anti-Muggle and anti-Muggle-born public ideology that is in the Wizarding world. The individual Muggles we see holding this ideology slowly develop into more tolerant human beings, whether through experience or necessity. It is important that Rowling develops, over the course of the series, the sympathies of the reader towards the Muggles because this then emphasizes the necessity and importance of fighting to protect them. It also carries the reader on a journey in which they might, like the anti-Muggle ideology encourages, dislike the Muggles at the beginning of the story and consider them as the other. Because Rowling nurtures the readers' sympathy towards Muggle characters, by the end of the series we too reject the anti-Muggle ideology as unacceptable.

As the main source of the Muggle view of magic, the Dursley family presents a strong case for thinking about wizards and witches as others to in the eyes of Muggles. The first commentary the series provides on magic is the Dursleys' opinions, which are quite negative with an underlying tone of fear—both of magic and of being associated

with magic, thus becoming an other within the Muggle world. To the Dursleys, any being that is magical or associated with magic is an other, and they assume that all Muggles (at least those who matter in their opinion) would agree with them, which is why they fear discovery of their familial association with the Potters—they believe that if other Muggles were to learn of their connection to a witch and wizard, they would be grouped in as part of the magical crowd and cast as others by Muggle society. The reasoning given for Mrs. Dursleys' pretending she didn't have a sister was that "her sister and her good-for nothing husband were as unDursleyish as it was possible to be" (*Philosopher's Stone* 2). Since the reader comes to find out that being "unDursleyish" translates into being a witch and wizard, the Dursley family in comparison then must be completely opposite of magical, thus they are the most "Muggle" as they could be.

With the Dursleys as the most commonly seen Muggles in the *Potter* series, and the only Muggle family the reader gets to know intimately, it would seem logical to assume that their views stand as the representation for how Muggles consider magic (those who know about it), yet the reader is cautioned at the beginning of the first book that the Dursleys are an extreme example of Muggles and their views of magic. Professor McGonagall's outburst upon learning that Dumbledore intends to leave Harry to be raised by the Dursleys reveals both the strength of their anti-magic attitudes and that the reader should not take the Dursleys to represent all Muggles: "You couldn't find two people who are less like us" (*Philosopher's Stone* 13). This plants the first seed of sympathy towards Muggles because we are meant to recognize that while the Dursleys are Muggles, they are not to be understood as an accurate representation of the ideology

that all Muggles hold. Brief scenes in which wizards and Muggles interact, scattered throughout the series, work to grow the readers' sympathy. The fear of the Grangers (Hermione's parents) in *Chamber of Secrets*, the supposed vulnerability of Muggles to the escaped wizard convict Sirius Black in *Prisoner of Azkaban*, the brutal murder of the Muggle groundskeeper and the cruelty towards the Muggle family at the Quidditch World Cup in *Goblet of Fire*, the dementors' effect on Dudley Dursley in *Order of the Phoenix*, and the mass disasters and threats of "mass Muggle killing[s]" (12) in *Half-Blood Prince* all work towards building sympathy for Muggles prior to when Voldemort begins to publicly and openly work to rid the magical world of Muggle-borns and to oppress Muggles.

Later in the series, the Dursley family reveals just how much they dislike anything magical as they lock away everything associated with magic that Harry owns—his spellbooks, wand, cauldron, and broomstick—in an attempt to prevent him from doing anything magical (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 3). Harry is forbidden from speaking about his parents (2), saying "Hogwarts," (20), or even defend his deceased parents against unfounded accusations (28). This vein of behavior continues throughout the series, continually re-emphasizing the view Muggles have of the magical world as other.

In her final book, Rowling offers a moment of redemption for the Dursleys in which they show a minute amount of acceptance and gratitude towards magic. Vernon remains the most aloof, ungratefully accepting the magical protection offered to him and his family, but his son Dudley, who has experienced magic first hand on several occasions, is able to overcome the barrier that had divided him and Harry previously.

Perhaps it was Dudley's experience with dementors that gave him a sense of gratitude towards both Harry as a person and magic in general. Dudley is the first in his family to firmly decide that he will accept magical protection from the Order of the Phoenix (*Deathly Hallows* 35), and he is the only one of the three that breaks through their discriminatory attitudes and shows any measure of gratitude and friendship towards Harry (*Deathly Hallows* 40,42).

Petunia, the person in the family with the second most intimate relationship with magic—a witch as a sister and a jealousy of her sister's acceptance into a magical school—attempts to say something to Harry, but fails. We are told “She stopped and looked back. For a moment Harry had the strangest feeling that she wanted to say something to him: She gave him an odd, tremulous look and seemed to teeter on the edge of speech, but then, with a little jerk of her head, she bustled out of the room after her husband and son” (*Deathly Hallows* 42). Looking at the syntax of these two sentences, we can see just how torn Petunia was at this moment. The passage moves from a short simple sentence to a long, compound-complex sentence full of short, jerky phrases and back to a smooth concluding clause. The short, frank sentence that starts this paragraph establishes a tone of tension and jerkiness. The colon in the second sentence suggests a turning point in the sentence, when Petunia moves from being motivated to say her piece to losing her confidence or motivation. Both the word “tremulous” and the frequent pauses suggested by the commas emphasize Petunia's action of verbally teetering and her uncertainty in whether or not she should speak her mind. Once she has finally made her

decision, the syntax of the sentence turns smooth once again, not using any commas and suggesting that the uncertainty she had has been eliminated by her choice.

Petunia's awareness and seeming desire to say something to Harry suggests that she has awareness that her attitude towards magic, and Harry for his relationship with it, is extreme and unjustified. While this suggested recognition does move Petunia slightly aware from viewing magical people as the other, her ultimate inability to overcome her fear, dislike, and conditioning against magic prevents her from achieving the same level of redemption as Dudley. It is critical that Rowling offers this moment of redemption to the Dursleys because it shows that the Muggles who were set up from the beginning to be as anti-magic prejudiced as possible can change—a capability that does not appear possible for those who believe the strongest in anti-Muggle ideology.

Since we are not filled in on the exact way that the Dursleys will be protected, it is difficult to consider the Dursleys' acceptance of protection in terms of being an act of acculturation. However, when paired with Hermione's choice to use magical means to best protect her Muggle parents, both Hermione's parents and the Dursleys' protection suggest that the magical world is providing a service to Muggles that the Muggle world cannot. In both instances, the Muggles must be "convinced," whether through persuasion or trickery, to be protected by magic. In both instances, the message is that Muggles need to rely on magical protectors rather than trying to protect themselves. Because the threat is magical, the only effective protection is only possible through magic, an assertion which discounts the ability of Muggles to make the decisions and take the actions which will be best for them. This is problematic because it sets the Wizarding

world up as having all the power—both to threaten and to protect from the threat, leaving the Muggles no recourse in the situation except to submit to the authority of magic in one way or another.

Although Hermione's parents are certainly more accepting of magic, even they view the magical world as other. The first glimpse the reader is given of Hermione's parents is in Diagon Alley, the magical world's shopping market where they are "standing nervously at the counter that ran all along the great marble hall, waiting for Hermione to introduce them" (*Chamber of Secrets* 56). Their nervousness is an indication that they are uncomfortable in the magical world despite having a daughter who is a witch. This nervousness is not unfounded as they soon become the target of discriminatory insults from Lucius Malfoy, the most notable Death Eater in the series (*Chamber of Secrets* 62). This altercation leaves the Grangers "shaking with fright" (63). The Grangers are rarely-shown characters in the text, and Rowling's designing of their first three mentions as all showing them with varying degrees of fear towards the magical world reinforce the idea of Muggles thinking of witches and wizards as others.

Their perspective of the magical world as the Otherworld and wizards as the other is reciprocated in full. The two adult wizards we see interacting in some way with the Grangers are Arthur Weasley and Lucius Malfoy. The treatment of the Grangers by Malfoy demonstrates that they are an other within this world and that they should be marked as such. This desire to create a way of publicly marking Muggle and Muggle-borns as other is central to the pureblood ideology. This is the driving force behind the term "Mudblood" that is used to label Muggle-borns as not being accepted in the



Wizarding world. Malfoy's need to publicly reference the presence of two Muggles in Diagon Alley as well as to insinuate that they are considered bad company to keep is an ideological strategy for providing a way of letting fellow witches and wizards know that the Grangers are not like them and are not to be treated as such. The Grangers are already uncomfortable in the Wizarding world as it is not their own, and their nervousness would certainly set them apart from the hustling and bustling of the many magical parents, so Malfoy's highlighting their otherness is not a matter of revealing a hidden other who is passing in the magical world but rather to emphasize the otherness of all Muggles and to make the Grangers aware of the public ideology in which he believes.

Despite the many parallels between the two worlds, we consistently see Muggles trying to suppress or eliminate magical culture and magical culture trying to suppress or eliminate Muggle culture. Voldemort's regime is founded on wanting the two cultures to remain completely separate with the magical culture ruling over the Muggles in an imperialist model of society. Muggles also try to erase the presence of the other (witches and wizards) from the Earth, whether through highly active and aggressive means or through more subtle suppression of magic such as the Dursleys' attempts.

The beginning of the *Prisoner of Azkaban* opens with Harry writing a History of Magic essay on the 14<sup>th</sup> century witch-burnings, a reference to a real historical event in the Middle Ages. The book tells us, through a magical textbook, of how unsuccessful witch burnings were:

Non-magic people (more commonly known as Muggles) were particularly afraid of magic in medieval times, but not very good at recognizing it. On

the rare occasion that they did catch a real witch or wizard, burning had no effect whatsoever. The witch or wizard would perform a basic Flame Freezing Charm and then pretend to shriek with pain while enjoying a gentle, tickling sensation. Indeed, Wendelin the Weird enjoyed being burned so much that she allowed herself to be caught no less than forty-seven times in various disguises. (*Prisoner of Azkaban 2*)

Although the text appears to make light of witch burning, the desire of Muggles to rid their culture of anyone magical is still a very aggressive position. The labeling of the Muggles motivation as fear rather than hatred suggests that witches and wizards were viewed as the other by Muggles during a time period in which magic was something in which Muggles were willing to believe. Part of otherness is a fear of the other, which is explained as the very motivation of the Muggles witch-burning tirades. The tone of this passage, which Harry is reading from a history textbook, is light and playful, showing no concern over the fact that hundreds or thousands of innocent non-magical people were burned alive. The only indication that burnings of innocents occurred is the phrase, “not very good at recognizing it,” which trivializes the act. Considering the seriousness of the event, one might think that a history book, whether Muggle or magical, would take a more serious tone when discussing it, but instead, this text appears to emphasize the silliness of the Muggles and provides no sympathy to those whom were unjustly punished.

Rowling provides an escape for the targets of the Muggle persecution but does not provide such an out for the Muggles who were victims at the hands of their fellow Muggles.

This treatment of such an event is problematic in that witches and wizards are shown to have means of escaping the consequences of being seen as others by the Muggles that allows the prejudice of the Muggles to harm only those who are actually part of their own community. This shows that witches and wizards have the capability to protect themselves from Muggles, yet the previous discussion of the magical protection of the Dursleys and the Granger's shows that Muggles apparently lack the capability of protecting themselves from magic.

While Muggles aren't portrayed as able to protect themselves from magic or successfully oppress the magical other, Muggle-born witches and wizards do make attempts at acculturation by using the Muggle world as protection when being actively oppressed by the magical world for being an other. When Hermione apparates Ron and Harry away from the danger in the magical world, she chooses to take them into the heart of Muggle London, suggesting that she felt the Muggle world could protect witches and wizards on the run better than the magical world could. When Ron asks Hermione about her choice of destinations, she replies, "it just popped into my head, but I'm sure we're safer out in the Muggle world, it's not where they'll expect us to be" (*Deathly Hallows* 163). Hermione, who because of her friendship with Harry has not lived completely in safety since entering the magical world, would consider the Muggle world to be the safest location because it was the place where she was safe as a child. Although her stated logic

is also solid, it cannot be denied that either Harry, who never experienced the Muggle world as his safe location, or Ron, who grew up in the magical world, would not have chosen to apparate to Muggle London. So, regardless of Hermione's conscious reasoning for apparating into Muggle London, her experience growing up as a Muggle contributes in some way to her decision.

It is important to note, however, that this attempt at acculturation fails as the trio is almost immediately found through magical means by the wizards who are trying to oppress Muggle-borns. Later, when the trio uses the forest to hide, we see that the forests tend to also be associated with Hermione's Muggle experiences, such as when the Hermione takes Harry to the Forest of Dean. This is the place in which Ron destroys the Horcrux, and has to suffer its attempt to stop him. Despite their attempt to hide from Voldemort here, it is part of his soul that emotionally tortures Ron. Although Muggle-borns attempt to use their Muggle culture to protect themselves, it is shown to be completely penetrable by magic whenever witches and wizards elect.

### Part III: The Otherness of the Other: Muggles Through the Eyes of Pureblood

#### Ideologists

Because Lacan's definition of the other emphasizes the importance of our own identity, it is important to consider Voldemort's own genealogical roots as a half-blood. Half of Voldemort's hereditary identity is Muggle, yet he refuses to admit this so adamantly that he works to purge the entire magical society of Muggle blood in an attempt to destroy the Muggle he sees within himself. His mixed identity creates a self-hatred that contributes to his willingness to destroy himself in an idealized attempt to purge himself of his paternal Muggle blood, an attempt that continuously fails. He shows no hesitation to split his soul into seven pieces and to frequently change his physical form—possessing animals and people and being reborn as a mutated human-like figure, yet the old magic he must use to give himself a physical body requires “bone of the father” (641) which is taken from the grave of Tom Riddle. He changes his name so as not to be known by his Muggle father's name, yet he uses the exact letters and only rearranges them. In explaining why Voldemort elected Harry, the half-blood, rather than Neville, the pureblood, to target as a baby, Dumbledore says, “He saw himself in you before he had ever seen you” (*Order of the Phoenix* 842). Behr reads this line through the lens of her “same-as-different” perspective and argues that Voldemort's decision to choose the boy most like him, the one who is “most nearly the same, yet different” (Behr 121) emphasizes the lesson of the importance of personal choice. While I follow Behr's interpretation that Voldemort's choice was motivated by the similarity he saw between himself and Harry, I consider this to be a reflection of how deep his own self-hatred runs.

He knows from the prophecy that this child will be able to defeat him, a piece of information that makes his choice between the two children all the more important, yet rather than following his own ideology (as Dumbledore points out) and choosing the pureblood wizard, he elects to consider the half-blood wizard, the child who is most representative of himself and that has Muggle-born blood within him as the biggest threat to him. This emphasizes Voldemort's desire to destroy himself because he felt compelled to destroy Harry, in whom he saw himself reflected; it also emphasizes how Voldemort considers wizards and witches with Muggle blood more threatening than those with pure blood.

Because these private attempts to purge his own otherness from his identity fail, Voldemort escalates by engaging the public ideology of anti-Mugglism and taking out his hatred on Muggle-borns and Muggles. Alone, Voldemort wouldn't have been successful in his oppressive regime of hatred, but because the ideology he acts upon is already established in the magical society, he is able to garner enough support from people like Umbridge, who while not a Death Eater or (conscious) Voldemort supporter, hates Muggle-borns and magical creatures enough to approve of and contribute to oppressive actions towards them.

The efforts of Voldemort and his supporters to segregate the two cultures and prevent what his ideology considers the contamination of pure magical blood are much easier to trace in the text as they are the central evil that is being fought against. The last book, *Deathly Hallows*, opens on a scene in which Voldemort is meeting with his Death Eaters. In this scene he discusses his ideology and goals extensively, saying ““Many of

our oldest family trees become a little diseased over time[...]You must prune yours, must you not, to keep it healthy? Cut away those parts that threaten the health of the rest[...]And in your family, so in the world...we shall cut away the canker that infects us until only those of the true blood remain..." (10-11). The language used here is indicative of the way Voldemort and his supporters think of Muggle influence in the Wizarding world. In fact, we as reader are aware that the pureblood family of the Death Eaters whose situation he is alluding to has already symbolically carried out these actions. In *Order of the Phoenix* we are shown the Black Family Tree on a tapestry, on which the names of certain family members who have rejected the pureblood ideology have been burnt off the tree (111-13). In Voldemort's speech, the extensive metaphor of growth and disease is used to cast Muggle influence as negatively affecting the Wizarding world and as a thing to be eliminated. The diction of this speech is blunt; the words and phrases "family tree," "keep it healthy," "health of the rest," and "true blood remain" all create the sense that the Wizarding culture is a living, delicate organism to be nurtured and tended. On the opposite side of this, the words "diseased," "prune," "cut away," "threaten," and "canker" all position the muggle influence as something not only to be fought against and eliminated, but something to fear. They indeed do fear the Muggles and Muggle-borns, whom they strive to oppress.

Dumbledore tells Harry, "Voldemort himself created his worst enemy, just as tyrants everywhere do! Have you any idea how much tyrants fear the people they oppress? All of them realize that, one day, amongst their many victims, there is sure to be one who rises against them and strikes back!" (*Half-Blood Prince* 510). This fear is

vividly acute in those who are prejudiced against Muggle-borns and magical creatures. Umbridge's terror at the centaurs' presence in the forest in *Order of the Phoenix* and the overarching concern of the Ministry of Magic at keeping magical creatures wandless, both suggest that the society is deeply afraid of the oppressed rising up against them. Voldemort, afraid of his own identity and genealogy, killed his father and paternal grandparents as a way to rid them from his world and, more pragmatically, as a way to create his first Horcrux<sup>21</sup>. His speech is making fun of one of the Death Eaters for having a blood-traitor in her pureblood family, yet his own genealogy is far more despicable by his own standards.

Voldemort directly labels the Muggle influence as a threat to the Wizarding world, which indicates that all Muggles and Muggle-borns are considered others. His concern is both with their genetic influence and their cultural influence, as evidenced by the terms Mudblood, for Muggle-born witches and wizards, and Blood-Traitor, for pureblood witches and wizards who disagree with Voldemort's pureblood philosophy. It is important to recognize that although Voldemort is the character who promotes and

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<sup>21</sup> Although it is possible that Riddle's diary was the first Horcrux, created from the indirect murder of Moaning Myrtle, it is more likely that the first created Horcrux was the ring, created from the murder of Riddle's father. Riddle indicates that he opened the Chamber of Secrets, ultimately leading to Myrtle's death, during his fifth year (*Chamber of Secrets* 312) in which he would have turned from 15 to 16 years old. The diary preserves Riddle's memory of him at age 16, but since his birthday is on December 31<sup>st</sup> (*Half-Blood Prince* 266) this means he could have made the diary into a Horcrux any time before his birthday in his sixth year at Hogwarts. The memory in which Harry witnesses Riddle asking about creating multiple Horcruxes has Riddle already wearing the Marvolo ring (*Half-Blood Prince* 369). Dumbledore tells Harry that it was the "summer of his [Riddle's] sixteenth year" (*Half-Blood Prince* 363) in which Riddle sought out his family. This provides an overlapping chronology in which the first Horcrux created could be either the diary or the ring. Because Riddle shows such intent interest in information about *how* to create a Horcrux (497-98), it can be assumed that at this point, he has not yet created one, and of the two murders, that of his father is certain to be more significant to him than that of a Muggle-born student. This leads me to the likely conclusion that the first Horcrux he would have made would have been from the murder of Tom Riddle, Sr.



pushes forth action on this pureblood philosophy, he is by no means the creator of it. The pureblood philosophy appears to be long-standing, tracing back at least to Salazar Slytherin, Voldemort's ancient ancestor and revealing deep-seated principle in the Wizarding society's cultural beliefs and practices. The scene's conclusion ends with the murder of a Muggle Studies professor and Voldemort's impassioned speech mocking her promotion of muggle relations. He first says that "Professor Burbage taught the children of witches and wizards all about Muggles...how they are not so different from us..." (11-12). His sarcasm in this statement reveals that although the reader understands that Muggles and wizards have quite a bit in common, this ideology is unwilling to consider, no less admit, those parallels as it would be admitting that they can see a reflection of themselves in Muggles, the other. This sarcasm is further emphasized just lines later when Voldemort calls her teaching "corrupting and polluting the minds of Wizarding children" (12).

He continues mocking her by twisting what she had written as a public defense of Muggle-borns and saying, "Wizards, she says, must accept these thieves of their knowledge and magic. The dwindling of the purebloods is, says Professor Burbage, a most desirable circumstance...She would have us all mate with Muggles...or, no doubt, werewolves" (12). Voldemort's caution to note these statements as belonging to the professor rather than being his own opinions, which is an obvious fact, demonstrates just how opposite these ideas are from those of Voldemort. His view of Muggle-born witches and wizards, for whom he uses the term Mudbloods, is that their presence in the Wizarding world could only have been gained through stealing from wizards. The last

line, building on a former joke/mockery of a Death Eater's relative marrying a werewolf, the joke that led to Voldemort's pruning the family tree speech, casts a more serious tone on this speech as we realize that in his mind, Muggles are no more than uncontrollable beasts. Although it is fairly evident that the dark humor Voldemort showed earlier has morphed into something more sinister here, the text emphasizes this by telling us that the speech was not followed by laughter and that instead everyone was silent because of "the anger and contempt in Voldemort's voice" (12). Indeed, this speech and reaction is immediately followed by the killing of the Professor and consumption of her body by Voldemort's giant snake (12). The seriousness of this offence comes not from her personal belief in pro-Muggle ideology, although Voldemort certainly finds that belief despicable, but rather from her public discourse promoting this alternative ideology.

In Slavoj Žižek's theory of otherness, he discusses how the other is considered a threat to the Enjoyment of the Subject. In this case, because Voldemort views the Muggle-borns as thieves of Wizarding "knowledge and magic," they are perceived as a direct threat to the Subject's (the Wizarding world) Enjoyment. Because of this view of Muggle-borns and Muggles as threatening to the purity of Wizarding society as well as their Enjoyment, they are established in this ideology as the other.

Although Rowling makes a point of emphasizing the unique difficulties and dangers that Hermione faces as a Muggle-born, in the trio's break-in at the Ministry of Magic, we once again see how Muggle-borns are portrayed as being incapable of saving themselves from their precarious societal positions. In this instance, we see Harry save a Muggle-born who is in danger. While the three heroes are sneaking around the Ministry

of Magic, Mary Cattermole, the wife of the man Ron is impersonating, is Muggle-born and is being interrogated. These interrogations by the Muggle-born Registration Commission demonstrate how the public ideology of discrimination and prejudice against Muggle-borns is institutionalized and enacted as a form of terrifying oppression. The danger to Cattermole is quite acute as the reader sees her sitting in the middle of a room, surrounded by dementors, which we know to be both dark and dangerous creatures. The description provided is quite terrifying:

The dark passage outside the courtrooms was packed with tall, black-hooded figures, their faces completely hidden, their ragged breathing the only sound in the place. The petrified Muggle-borns brought in for questioning sat huddled and shivering on hard wooden benches. Most of them were hiding their faces in their hands...some were accompanied by families, others sat alone. The dementors were gliding up and down in front of them, and the cold, and the hopelessness, and the despair of the place laid themselves upon Harry like a curse... (*Deathly Hallows* 257)

The sense of ultimate confinement created through the overwhelming physical and emotional presence of the dementors is a representation of the level of oppression that the Muggle-borns face under this political regime. The physical space in this passage is striking as the majority of the space is taken up by the dementors, who literally embody hopelessness and despair, and the Muggle-borns seem to physically shrink together, echoing how their freedom is growing smaller and smaller as they are compressed into a socially-created template rather than being recognized as individuals.

The terms “huddled” and “hiding” both give the sense of pulling into themselves and retreating from the world in which they live. The physical action of hiding their faces is not only defensive against the threat of the dementor’s kiss but against the oppression the dementors represent.

Although Hermione is also in the courtroom (in disguise) where the woman is being interrogated, it is Harry who breaks into action and attacks the interrogators. It is Harry who quickly determines a plan for getting all the Muggle-borns waiting for interrogation out of the Ministry. This scene, in which Harry is the main actor and Hermione simply assists, often having trouble doing so because of her difficulty maintaining a Patronus charm, both emphasizes the powerlessness of Muggle-borns as well as propagates the imperialist belief that the other needs the colonial influence to save them.

A second situation from which a Muggle-born must be saved provides a more complex commentary on their social positions and power. While being tortured at Malfoy Manor, Hermione is rendered completely powerless against the will of pureblood ideologists, yet it is the combined efforts of a pureblood, Ron Weasley, and a liberated house elf, Dobby, that are able to save her. Dobby’s contribution provided a way to save Hermione, and his tragic death at the end of the scene emphasizes the importance of his contribution to the rescue. Although once again a Muggle-born is unable to defend or save herself, the fact that Dobby, a house elf, is the main agent of her rescue is significant in working against the imperialist foundation seen in the previously described scene. Because magical creatures such as house elves have historically been regulated much in

the same way as Muggle-borns are being regulated under Voldemort's regime, there is a type of parallel between the social positions of house elves and Muggle-borns, making Dobby's work to rescue Hermione a moment in which Rowling's text returns power to the other.

Ultimately it is the lack of understanding and respect for the powers of the other that leads to Voldemort and his followers' downfall. At the Malfoy Manor, Dobby's presence as a house elf is forgotten about and ignored, and because of this, his magical abilities are not guarded against. It is because of the underestimation of house elves that Dobby is able to apparate and disapparate into the Manor when no witch or wizard can. This ability allows him to save the three heroes and several other prisoners. Although Ron and Harry also contribute to Hermione's rescue—Ron pulling her from the wreckage of a fallen chandelier and Harry grabbing their wands—without Dobby's ability to disapparate from the Manor, the efforts of the two boys would have been for naught.

The brief exchange of dialog between Dobby and Bellatrix shows how house elves are others just as Muggle-borns are. Bellatrix thinks nothing of Dobby's life, immediately giving the order to kill him, and when he defends himself by casting the Narcissa's wand away from her, Bellatrix reproaches him saying, "'You dirty little monkey...How dare you take a witch's wand, how dare you defy your masters?'" (*Deathly Hallows* 474). The insulting name Bellatrix chooses references the same insults she leveled at Hermione about her blood being "dirty" (473), the underlying meaning of the derogatory term "Mudblood" that is used for Muggle-borns. Just as house elves have never been allowed wands, the scene in the Ministry of Magic shows this to be a parallel

with Muggle-borns, whose wands are confiscated under the authority of the new regime (260).

During Mary Cattermole's interrogation, we come to understand that Voldemort's regime has ordained that magic must be hereditary, and thus any Muggle-born witch or wizard had to have stolen their powers from a "real" witch or wizard. The regulation of these individuals is eerily parallel to that of non-human magical creatures—house elves, centaurs, and goblins, among others. The privilege of possessing a wand, the distinguishing feature of a witch or wizard, is particularly guarded from the magical creatures—an issue that simmers throughout the series and occasionally bubbles to the surface in a brief scene or homework assignment. As part of his History of Magic OWLS exam, Harry is asked his opinion on whether "wand legislation contribute[d] to, or [led] to better control of, goblin riots of the eighteenth century" (*Order of the Phoenix* 725).

In addition to these more subtle parallels between oppressed and regulated magical creatures and their otherness within the magical world, the fountain at the Ministry of Magic, which appears several times in the series, further demonstrates how these two groups of others are equal. In *Order of the Phoenix*, the major art piece decorating the main room of the Ministry of Magic, the representative government body which organizes and runs the entire magical community of Britain, is the Fountain of Magical Brethren. The description provided of this fountain suggests a reality incongruent with its name:

A group of golden statues, larger than life-size, stood in the middle of a circular pool. Tallest of them all was a noble-looking wizard with his

wand pointing straight up in the air. Grouped around him were a beautiful witch, a centaur, a goblin, and a house-elf. The last three were all looking adoringly up at the witch and wizard. (*Order of the Phoenix* 127)

From this description, it is easy to explain the represented ideology—one in which witches and wizards are more magically powerful and more deserving of magic.

Regardless of the evidence throughout the series that disputes this belief, it remains the working ideological foundation of the Ministry of Magic. This can be seen through the regulation of magical creatures, including, and perhaps particularly, those who have the ability to perform magic.

Later, upon Harry's second viewing of this fountain, he makes an observation that supports this interpretation of its meaning. Upon closer observation, Harry considers the wizard as looking "rather weak and foolish," the witch as "wearing a vapid smile like a beauty contestant," and the goblin and centaur as "unlikely to be caught staring this soporily at humans of any description." He concludes that "only the house-elf's attitude of creeping servility looked convincing" (156). This revised description of the fountain lends credibility to the belief that the representation of magical society represented by the artwork is false and unrealistic.

When the three heroes return to the Ministry of Magic in the final book, they again encounter the statue which has been reworked to portray the new ideology of the Ministry—one in which Muggles and Muggle-borns are below witches and wizards. Upon entering the Ministry, the new statue that has replaced the fountain is the first thing that readers are shown: "It was rather frightening, this vast sculpture of a witch and a

wizard sitting on ornately carved thrones, looking down at the Ministry workers toppling out of fireplaces below them. Engraved in foot-high letters at the base of the stature were the words "MAGIC IS MIGHT" (*Deathly Hallows* 242). Both the position of the witch and wizard seated on high as well as the engraved words suggest the power of magic over non-magic. The implication of this is that those with magic have power and a right to it. This message becomes even clearer through Hermione's observation that the witch and wizard are sitting on Muggles: "Muggles...in their rightful place" (242). Her interpretation of the statue is quite evidently the direction that Ministry regulation is moving in as we soon see the harsh interrogations of Muggle-borns regarding how they acquired their magic. Harry describes the statue in more detail, noting that "what he thought were decoratively carved thrones were actually mounds of carved humans: hundreds and hundreds of naked bodies, men, women, and children, all with rather stupid, ugly faces, twisted and pressed together to support the weight of the handsomely robed wizards" (242). Not only does this design depict the hierarchy of the world as Voldemort envisions it, but the design also shows that Muggles (of which Muggle-borns are made out to be under Voldemort's reign) have replaced house-elves, centaurs, and goblins as the oppressed other in the Ministry's eyes.

It is interesting that while Harry is the savior of the Wizarding world, it is Hermione, the Muggle-born, the other, who continuously recognizes and stands against the oppression of magical creatures. Brycchan Carey argues that while Harry's relationship with Dobby indicates a private response on Harry's part to the situation of house-elves, Hermione takes a noticeably public stand on the issue because she



recognizes the public nature of the problem (Carey 104-105). Although there is nothing to indicate that Hermione has made any connection between her social position as a Muggle-born and the social position of house-elves in the Wizarding world, Hermione has come to the understanding that the oppression of magical creatures developed from a public ideology. This understanding leads her to make an attempt to reconstruct that ideology in a way that would give measure to the welfare of those being oppressed. While Hermione doesn't appear to consciously hold this position because she sees herself as united with magical creatures by oppression, she, far more than Harry and Ron, understands what it is like to be an other in the magical world because she has already had to endure the taunts of Draco Malfoy and other pureblood ideologists calling her a Mudblood.

Hermione starts S.P.E.W. in an attempt to raise awareness of the treatment of house elves. She is also the one who, in the fifth book, recognizes the importance of treating the house elf Kreacher with respect, despite his hatred of her on the basis of her blood status. If anyone in the house has a reason to despise Kreacher, it should be Hermione—after all, she bears the brute of his many derogatory comments—yet she continuously advocates for the others to be kind to the elf, recognizing that he is a product of the treatment he has received. Hermione continuously stands as the defender of magical creatures—promoting the rights of house-elves, protesting Rita Skeeter's false characterization of Hagrid the half-giant as vicious and brutal, protecting the identity of Lupin the werewolf, arguing that goblins have justification for distrusting wizards, and objecting to Dolores Umbridge's calling the centaur's "half-breeds." At the end of the

fifth book, it is Hermione who thinks to align herself with the centaurs in an attempt to escape from the tyrannical Professor Umbridge. While the centaurs may not appreciate her “using” them, this incident shows her understanding of their similar positions in Umbridge’s ideology (revealed later in *Deathly Hallows* when she gleefully participates in investigations into Muggle-borns’ backgrounds).

This public ideology of oppression manifests itself in oppressive regulation under Voldemort’s regime. In a unique moment, Rowling shows Hermione attempting to reclaim the public term that has been traditionally used to designate her as an other. Hermione, speaking to a goblin, connects her status as a Muggle-born to that of magical creatures saying, ““And I’m hunted quite as much as any goblin or elf, Griphook! I’m a Mudblood!”” (*Deathly Hallows* 489). Ron, a pureblood wizard who is pro-Muggle objects to her characterization of herself as a Mudblood, but Hermione responds, ““Why shouldn’t I?...Mudblood and proud of it! I’ve got no higher position under this new order than you have, Griphook! It was me they chose to torture, back at the Malfoys’!”” (489). Hermione’s comment that she is “proud” of being a Mudblood shows her attempt to redefine the word and give it a connotation that would empower rather than oppress Muggle-borns. This shows the importance of language in shaping the public ideology, as we see through the rhetorical work Umbridge oversees at the Ministry of Magic.

Umbridge provides an interesting insight into the prevailing ideology of the Wizarding world, for she is not a death eater, yet she operates happily under Voldemort’s control of the Ministry of Magic, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Her hatred of half-breeds in *Order of the Phoenix* is shown to extend to Muggle-born witches and

wizards which she sees as a type of half-breed—a being whose source of magical abilities is not readily obvious and cannot be understood. Unlike pureblood and half-blood wizards and witches whose magic is presumably hereditary, for it is rare for a child born in a magical family to not have powers (a Squib), there is no explicit explanation for how Muggle-born witches and wizards come to have magical abilities, thus making them a threat to the magical world because their source of power cannot be controlled or understood. This is evidenced by the pamphlets being produced in the Ministry, which are titled “Mudbloods and the Dangers They Pose to a Peaceful Pure-Blood Society” and visually represent Muggle-borns as invasive and aggressive weeds which kill the healthy, desirable plants (*Deathly Hallows* 249)—a metaphor echoing Voldemort’s family tree speech to his Death Eaters.

## Conclusion

The contents of this article are only a beginning point of research into the richness of Rowling's *Harry Potter* books and into the topic of otherness in them. I have only scratched the surface of this issue and had to, due to the limitations of length, largely ignore a multiplicity of factors that are connected to the otherness in *Harry Potter*. Harry's identity development and setting's role in that development both offer rich opportunities to further explore otherness. The complexities of the social hierarchy of the magical world also run far deeper than I was able to explore here. I would like to take a moment however to address the implications of this article in the non-literary world.

Although we might like to believe that we have come a long way from the brutal treatment of the cultural other that occurred in the fourteenth century witch burnings, the truth is that as a global society, we have a long way to go before this can be considered true. Many countries still hold onto their beliefs about magic and witchcraft threatening them, which has led to modern day witch burnings. ABC News reports that early in February 2013, "a 20-year-old mother...was stripped, tortured with a hot iron rod, doused in gasoline and set alight on a pile of car tires and trash by a mob" (Associated Press par. 2) in Papua New Guinea. Apparently witchcraft is still blamed for "unexplained misfortunes" such as that for which Kepari Leniata was blamed (Associated Press par. 5). This trend has also been documented in South Africa, where it is estimated "at least 100 accused witches [were] incinerated or stoned to death" in 1994 (Drogin par. 4). It was only 68 years ago that World War II ended and with it a holocaust aiming to eradicate cultural others from the world. The Holocaust targeted Jews for their racial otherness,

homosexuals for the sexual otherness, and communists for their political otherness; the connecting factor between all groups who were persecuted is that they were an other within their culture.

This article explores public ideologies of cultural otherness in *Harry Potter*, which I consider a topic demanding attention. Public ideologies of cultural otherness are actively in play throughout the world, and Rowling's series teaches us that we must pay attention to them and not just blindly accept them. While Rowling's text may not fully succeed in promoting acculturation and the acceptance of other cultures for the inherent value they have in being different, what her text does do is provide the reader with an awareness of the importance of noticing public ideology towards otherness and working towards a more tolerant ideology. Children's literature is a reflection of the moral lessons and the public ideologies we choose to instill in youth, and thus it is crucial that we pay attention to what these messages are, not so we can ignorantly ban books but rather so we can hold open discussions about what these texts mean and what they can teach us about ourselves.

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