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WOMEN AS WITCHES: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE STEREOTYPE IN J. K. ROWLING'S *HARRY POTTER* AND TERRY PRATCHETT'S *WYRD SISTERS*

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ЖЕНИТЕ КАТО ВЕЩИЦИ: ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯТА НА СТЕРЕОТИПА В „ХАРИ ПОТЪР“ НА ДЖ. К. РОУЛИНГ И „ПОСЕСТРИМИ В ЗАНАЯТА“ НА ТЕРИ ПРАТЧЕТ

This article explores some of the aspects of the ‘women-as-witches’ stereotype in the literary works of J. K. Rowling and Terry Pratchett, while focusing on both the subversion of the stereotype and its reinforcement. The focus of my work is on the depiction of this type of gender profiling in a fantastic setting and imagined societies, while drawing a parallel with the real world. I first focus on a brief outline of the historical and cultural significance of the stereotype, followed by a discussion of its literary aspects in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and Terry Pratchett's *Wyrd Sisters* novel.

Keywords: *J. K. Rowling; Terry Pratchett; gender; stereotype; witches.*

Статията разглежда някои от особеностите на стереотипа „жените като вещици“ в литературните произведения на Дж. К. Роулинг и Тери Прагчет, като се фокусира както върху разрушаването на стереотипа, така и върху неговото укрепване. Акцентира се върху изобразяването на този тип профилиране на пола във фантастична обстановка и въображаеми общества, като същевременно се изгражда паралел с извънлингвистичната реалност. В началото е представен бърз преглед на историческото и културно значение на стереотипа, последван от обсъждане на неговите литературни аспекти в поредицата книги за Хари Потър на Дж. К. Роулинг и романът „Посестрими в занаята“ на Тери Прагчет.

Ключови думи: *Дж. К. Роулинг; Тери Прагчет; пол; стереотип; вещици.*

The woman-as-a-witch stereotype is one of the most profound examples of vilification of women who are imbued with power and skills beyond the ones they are allowed from matrimonial status and social conventions. I acknowledge that centuries of predominantly male-centric education in both religious and social prowess have led to the widespread propagation of this stereotype, fueling the historical disregard and ostracisation of female herbalists and apothecaries as wisewomen or witches. The extreme, persecutory nature of this stereotype has undergone a major metamorphosis in the past few decades, yet it persists in modern-day literary texts and social reality as an almost inborn, deep mistrust of empowered women.

In the following paragraph, I will offer a glimpse of the “woman-as-a-witch” stereotype, as based on witchcraft and magic, which Gonçalves defines as “the most extreme expression of female deviance and empowerment” (Gonçalves 2014: 1). Originating in the Middle Ages, this stereotype represents the

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fears and superstitions of a male-centric society, shackled in illiteracy, poverty and vicious religious dogma. Fear of the unknown is a powerful drive, especially in a society where traditions are upheld, religious rites – honored and innovations – shunned. As per the teachings of the Old Testament, women were regarded with general distrust if they shied away from convention and tradition in any way: “we argue that women were preferably targeted if they were too outspoken, not compliant enough, defiant of the established Knowledge by mastering natural magic and alternative forms of medicine” (Gonçalves 2014: 4). There was also their ill-perceived “sexuality”, which was believed to bring men into “sin” and the very general threat a learned woman posed to men’s supremacy and status:

The discourses and practices surrounding the persecution of witches were linked to men’s efforts to gain power and status, which were informed, after all, by contemporary ideals of masculinity; the social forces that came into play as witches were accused, tried and executed were informed by gender at every level (the village, the local court, the state; and the psychological and social impact of this extraordinarily negative female stereotype, although difficult to isolate, was surely enormous. (Hults 2011: 13)

Even in today’s society – where bias and mistrust on the basis of gender are somewhat overshadowed by ill-treatment because of race, skin color and nationality – traces of some of the derogatory features of the “women-as-witches” stereotype still remain. It is, however, necessary to stress that due to centuries of being placed in a subordinate position, women’s pursuit of gender equality has claimed a few victims of its own, sometimes resulting in unrealistic expectations, pressure and stress, which are easily made worse by lingering mistrust of empowered women in what is now regarded as a lot less male-centric reality.

Breaking stereotypes, deeply rooted in social conventions and religious dogma, is no mean feat. All the more so in fantasy literature, which – in its very essence – encourages convention, tradition and *the cliché*. The early years of Fantasy as a genre proved beyond any doubt that male protagonists sold more copies and roped in more dedicated fans. Even renowned, highly-acclaimed series such as J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and Robert Jordan’s *The Wheel of Time*, which shaped epic fantasy literature and set the standards of the genre, did not manage (or, in many ways, did not even try) to break away from the male-centric mold of their characters. It can be argued that this particular development of the Fantasy genre as a whole is a product of both chance and necessity. If the first books to sell well and be highly regarded had focused on a female protagonist, the genre might have adopted a more inclusive approach. It is important to note that authors of fantasy literature have always tried to introduce powerful female characters in their works, yet have rarely succeeded in portraying them as capable enough or independent enough to match their male counterparts. A new approach was required in the way Fantasy treated its “witches”.

The magical woman, whether she is witch, sorceress, mage... appears with regularity in Fantasy. And as Fantasy works present newly imagined magical women characters, by challenging or deconstructing traditional tropes and proposing alternatives, they are often at odds with generic expectations and thus demand new narrative approaches. If these new approaches are not enacted, the tension that arises between the figure of the magical woman and narrative expectations is resolved at the expense of the magical woman: she is contained within a patriarchal narrative, despite her power (Wickham 2018: 8).

To attempt to liberate the protagonist seat from its male-centric confines, both T. Pratchett and J. K. Rowling make a point of introducing a form of gender equality in their works. T. Pratchett goes even further than that by redefining the very essence of the “scary” witch and creating an image of a powerful, yet self-disciplined woman; a superior, yet socially-adept keeper of the natural peace and balance. J. K. Rowling, on the other hand, regards, through the entirety of her books, the word “witch” simply as the linguistic opposite of “wizard”, thus emphasizing personality and choice rather than gender. What both of them focus on exclusively is equality of opportunity rather than outcome. Women in both their literary universes are given a level playing field rather than an advantage and both T. Pratchett and J. K. Rowling allow their female characters the freedom to either reinforce the stereotype or attempt to overcome it.

Fantasy worlds offer the freedom to imagine a different society: “... if an author wishes to explore issues of colonialism or conquest, or gender, or revolution, setting their story within a world not our

own gives them the unique freedom to do so” (Wickham 2018: 42 – 43). It is vital to note, however, that constructing a narrative without a certain degree of gender-bias is by no means possible, even in the setting of an imagined world. In that sense, *Harry Potter* is not entirely consistent, and therefore rigid, in its approach to gender. Some female characters are represented in a way similar to the original stereotype, like Fleur Delacour for example, who takes up a “position of the beautiful, sexual being with power over men” (Cherland 2008: 276). The witch was often represented as seductive and promiscuous – a role much feared by men, even more so when the aforementioned “being” is in possession of unnatural powers and magic prowess. However, depicting witchcraft in *Harry Potter* simply as means to dominate and ensnare men would be extremely inaccurate, as the leading female characters are usually built to possess characteristics that help supplement or even surpass those of the leading male characters: “Much of Hermione’s strength lies in her ability to learn. Hermione also manages to put her learning into practice. This enables her to help Harry and Ron who consistently find themselves in trouble” (Fristedt 2005: 5-6). That in turn would mean that it is not dominance that J.K. Rowling envisioned for her female characters, but knowledge and wisdom – and just enough power to give them stable footing and some leverage over their male counterparts. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that women in J.K. Rowling’s books often fight, kill and are killed alongside men in a bid to protect not only their families, but their freedoms and ideals as well. By removing physical power from the equation, strength is no longer limited by gender. Even the gentlest of grasps is fit to wave a wand. Witches in J.K. Rowling’s world are, consequently, not vilified for their powers, which often surpass those of wizards. Instead, they are discussed as individuals, capable of great bravery as well as abominable cruelty and generally dependent on their own personal reasons and beliefs when choosing between the sides of good and evil. Personality outweighs gender, especially in the later books of the series, which are notable for the growth and vivid depiction of all female characters: “...we see Hermione the giggler, Hermione the helpful and capable, Hermione the emotionally expressive, and Hermione the clever” (Cherland 2008: 278). It also becomes increasingly obvious, that J.K. Rowling is very much willing to fully portray the more unsavory part of her witches’ characters alongside the benign and the praiseworthy. A good example would be the somewhat casual racism of auntie Muriel: “I’ve just been instructing the bride on how best to wear my tiara... She’s a good-looking girl, but still – *French*” (Rowling 2007a: 118).

T. Pratchett’s approach towards witches is a bit different, as even though he does discuss gender and the equality of opportunity in his books, in *Wyrd Sisters* he addresses the image of the witch itself. While it is true that much of the fear incited by witches hinges on the fact that they are women, it is their “satanic” powers and magical prowess that frightened the Middle Ages’ men and their: “well-established notions of female vulnerability to succumbing to evil, in all its forms” (Gonçalves 2014: 2). A witch is usually without a face or identity. It is a brand – a badge of shame born from the fear of the strange and magical, of the interface between the dark corners of our conscious mind and our bestial unconscious urges, of the unknown. Giving a witch a name, a private life, feelings and personality can subdue the fear and anxiety and bring about understanding or even humor: “In their clearing above the forest the witches spoke thus: ‘I’m babysitting on Tuesday’...” (Pratchett 1988: 7). Terry Pratchett is as famous as he is well-versed in approaching stereotypes and superstitions with a healthy dose of subtle ridicule. It is an ingenious way of altering the reader’s opinion on a topic, for after laughing, a notion of ‘closeness’ settles between the subject of dread and the dreading. Pratchett makes a point of introducing the witches in his world as an integral part of society: “For our Jason’s youngest. I can manage Friday.” (8) Even though empowered, their power lies in their strong will and firm resolve, rather than in the occult: “‘No,’ she said, on general principles...”, “Granny Weatherwax had Views” (Pratchett 1988: 18, 39). In the end, it is not power that the witches of the Discworld seek, but respect. For through respect, they can sustain a powerful illusion of strength, which, in turn, lets them focus on their main mission of (as Esme puts it herself) “smoothing out life’s humps and bumps” (Pratchett 1988: 39). It is not the practice of magic, but refraining from it that defines the witches of the Discworld. This natural wisdom, amusingly enough, is portrayed as almost inborn in the witches of the Discworld but difficult to grasp for their male wizard counterparts. One of Pratchett’s *Wyrd Sisters* might be as powerful as a wizard, yet

possess a druidic ambiance, a strong sense of purpose and unbreakable spirit, without having to cast a single spell.

The “woman-as-a-witch” stereotype I have ventured to discuss in this article has exhausted much of its zeal over the many decades since its birth in the Middle Ages. Regardless of that, some parts of it retain surprising tenacity, appearing in modern society and literature as norms and practices. The attempts of both T. Pratchett and J.K. Rowling to neutralize its lingering effects in their works show great flare and dedication to gender equality, to the much sought-after equality of opportunity. In an honorable attempt at redefining the “scary”, “deviant” and “sexually obnoxious” image of the witch, they end up reconstructing and transforming the very way these “empowered” women are viewed. By personalizing and integrating witches into an imaginary society while entitling them to a voice and the ‘luxury’ of free will, the focus is switched towards women and their choices instead of witches and their magic.

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