

Bloody Brothers and Suffering Sisters: *The Duchess of Malfi* and Harry Potter

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Families

When Harry Potter looks into the Mirror of Erised, he sees his parents. There are other relatives too, including an old man with the same knobby knees as Harry who is presumably one of his grandfathers.¹ There are, however, no siblings. While this is presumably because the Mirror is showing what has been rather than what might have been, it is remarkable that while Harry often imagines what life might have been like with his parents, he never seems particularly troubled by the lack of siblings: the one brief reference to the idea comes only in the very last book, when he thinks that “He could have invited friends to his house ... he might even have had brothers and sisters.”² Perhaps he is wise not to dwell on this possibility, however, for in this essay I am going to suggest that siblings in the Harry Potter books are often a source of tension and trouble, and that at least some of the sibling relationships in the book are explicitly and emphatically pathologised in ways which, I propose, are directly informed by John Webster’s Jacobean tragedy *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623).

In drawing on the play, Rowling puts what may seem like the distinctively modern cult of celebrity in dialogue with what is thus revealed as its early modern equivalent: Renaissance self-fashioning. Rowling’s own growing celebrity, as she shot to fame while still writing the Harry Potter books, is reflected in the books’ increasing concern with the nature and effects of publicity, embodied in the character of Rita Skeeter, who enters the series in the fourth book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000). It also clearly colours the conception of Cormoran Strike in the detective novels Rowling later published under the pseudonym of Robert Galbraith, for Strike can never escape from the fact that he is the illegitimate and estranged son of a rock star of whom everyone has heard. It is in the nature of adaptation that the source text is likely to be already famous, a fact with which any reworking must contend as best it may, and in the case of *The Duchess of Malfi* that sense of a strong originary identity is confirmed by the heroine’s famous declaration that she herself is not subject to change, since whatever may happen to her she is Duchess of

Malfi still. Ironically, Rowling herself hamstrung the film adaptations of the Harry Potter books by insisting on a sterile and unproductive fidelity, but her use of *The Duchess of Malfi* is much more subtle than this, for although she is certainly not faithful to it, and indeed does not even hint at its presence, she has taken a number of central concerns and reworked them creatively, intelligently, and productively, in ways which show us how one of the core elements of early modernism continues to resonate and resurface in contemporary society.³

It might initially seem counter-intuitive to suggest an early seventeenth-century tragedy as an influence on a series of late twentieth-century children's books. However, as I shall explore later, the Harry Potter stories are unusually dark for children's books (and indeed in some ways were not conceived as such), and they are in fact not an unlikely place to find echoes from long ago. Structurally, the Potter books are as interested in the past as in the future, and indeed the entire trajectory of Harry's career bears a surprising resemblance to family history. With every step forward in Harry's development and education, he also learns something about the past. This starts early in the first book, when Hagrid first tells him he is a wizard: "Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before—and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life—a high, cold, cruel laugh."⁴ In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), Harry tells Lupin that when the Boggart turned into a Dementor, "I heard my dad ... That's the first time I've ever heard him,"⁵ but of course it is not literally the first time: the reason Harry is able to hear James now is because the memory of having once done so has been lurking latent in his memory. One of the things magic offers is a link to the past: Ollivanders have been "Makers of Fine Wands since 382 BC,"⁶ and the name of St Brutus's Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys, the school which Aunt Marge is told that Harry attends, gestures at the Trojan Brutus, great-grandson of Aeneas, who supposedly gave his name to the then uninhabited land of Britain (this is a story with which Rowling, who studied classics at university, would certainly have been familiar). What Harry learns most about, though, is families: his own, Voldemort's, and those of other people he knows such as Neville and Sirius—and often that knowledge is painful. Families in the Potter books are rarely a source of unmixed delight. The Weasleys present as an ideal vision of family life and Harry is preserved from danger by his mother's blood, in the shape of Aunt Petunia, but family is a source of vulnerability too: Malfoy's insults typically centre on family; as Hagrid tells Snape, Ron "was provoked ... Malfoy was

insultin' his family,"⁷ and Ron himself says that if Malfoy "makes one more crack about my family, I'm going to get hold of his head and -."⁸ When George tells Percy that "Christmas is a time for family," it comes close to a form of bullying as "They frogmarched Percy from the room, his arms pinned to his side by his jumper."⁹ Likewise, Marcus Belby's father and uncle "don't get on very well."¹⁰ The whole story indeed becomes in one sense a reverse birth narrative when the cauldron used for Voldemort's resurrection is "a great stone belly large enough for a full-grown man to sit in"; it provides the setting for what he refers to as "my rebirthing party," and Voldemort refers to the Death Eaters as "My *true* family."¹¹

Families in general are in fact more often a source of trouble in the books than not, and although it is of course conventional in children's adventure stories to get the parents out of the way as expeditiously as possible, in the Harry Potter books the process is taken to extremes. In one sense, Harry's story is the complete realisation of the family romance, with Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon as very bad parents and Dudley as a very bad brother, but actually we come closer to a vision of the family as nightmare. Being a Squib is only a source of shame in the context of family, just as the Howler sent by Neville's grandmother after he writes down the Gryffindor passwords tells him that he "had brought shame on the whole family."¹² When a witch with a satsuma up her nostril arrives at St Mungo's just after Christmas, the receptionist has no difficulty in identifying the likely cause of the problem: "Family argument, eh? ... You're the third I've seen today."¹³ The admission of new members to families is a particular stress point, as witnessed by Mrs Weasley's and Ginny's initial rejection of Fleur, but the potential for trouble is always latent. Most disturbingly, it is obvious from fairly early on that the similarities between Harry and Voldemort are likely to indicate a family relationship of some sort, and both do indeed prove to be descended from the Peverells.

The sense of family tension is especially strong in the case of siblings. The Potter books are steeped in references to siblings. Some of these are derived from Jane Austen, identified by J. K. Rowling on many occasions as her favourite author, whose books offer many examples of sibling relationships. The reference to Dumbledore's eyes being "light, bright and sparkling"¹⁴ recalls Jane Austen's own description of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), one of the most famous stories of sisters ever told.¹⁵ Mrs Norris, after whom Filch's cat is named, owes her prominence in *Mansfield Park* (1814) to the fact of being Lady Bertram's sister. Other sibling relationships work on the level of plot. Harry and Hermione are only children: Hermione was originally intended to have a non-magical

younger sister, but she never appears in any of the books.¹⁶ Ron is not, and his many siblings are a source of pressure for him; what Ron sees in the Mirror of Erised is himself alone. When Harry says, “Wish I’d had three wizard brothers, ‘Five,’ said Ron. For some reason, he was looking gloomy”; shortly afterwards, when Harry asks “What house were your brothers in? ‘Gryffindor,’ said Ron. Gloom seemed to be settling on him again.”¹⁷ Ron has reason to be gloomy, because the House system can work to underline difference as well as similarity: the Patil twins are identical, but Parvati is in Gryffindor and Padma in Ravenclaw, while Sirius becomes the first (and last) Black not to be in Slytherin. It is also suggestive that when Hermione becomes friendly with Krum, Ron’s accusation is specifically that she is “fraternising with the enemy,”¹⁸ a term later echoed by Percy when he warns Ron against “continued fraternisation” with Harry:¹⁹ fraternising literally means acting as a brother, the idea being that Harry and Krum are bad and dangerous ‘brothers’ who will harm their adopted ‘siblings.’ Indeed, Percy is in general the extreme case of the tribulations of belonging to a family, in ways that give pain both to himself and his relations. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Ron recounts how Percy said that “if Mum and Dad were going to become traitors to the Ministry he was going to make sure everyone knew he didn’t belong to our family any more.”²⁰ Sirius takes a similar attitude to the Lestranges: “As far as I’m concerned, they’re not my family. *She’s* [Bellatrix Lestrange] certainly not my family.”²¹ The possession of siblings proves even more painful, albeit in different ways, for both Dumbledore, whose sister Ariana is killed because of, and possibly even by him, and for Aunt Petunia, who “pretended she didn’t have a sister” and refers to Lily as “my dratted sister.”²² There are even problems for Uncle Vernon, who lives in terror of his sister Marge ever discovering that Harry is a wizard, making Marge’s visit to Privet Drive a source of family-based tension for him as well as for Harry. Madame Maxime is ashamed of being half-giant, and Hagrid refuses to leave his house when Rita Skeeter reveals the identity of his mother, prompting Dumbledore to reflect that “My own brother, Aberforth, was prosecuted for practising inappropriate charms on a goat” (though at that stage we still had no idea of the horror of the Dumbledores’ family life).²³ Barty Crouch’s promising career is cut short by the disgrace of his son, who seeks to replace his father by being to Voldemort “closer than a son,”²⁴ while Neville has parents who can no longer recognise him.

Some sibling relations are even more profoundly troubled. When Ron is told by Hermione that “Michael Corner and his friends wouldn’t have come if he hadn’t been going out with Ginny,” Ron’s response is comic, but also clearly excessive: “‘He’s

WHAT?” spluttered Ron, outraged, his ears now resembling curls of raw beef. “She’s going out with - my sister’s going - what d’you mean, Michael Corner?” . This degree of horror is surely unexpected to the reader, but not, it seems, to Ginny, since Hermione explains that “this is exactly why Ginny hasn’t told you she’s seeing Michael, she knew you’d take it badly.” Nor is Ron’s objection just to Michael Corner: when Ginny tells him that she is now seeing Dean Thomas, ““WHAT?” shouted Ron, upending the chessboard,”²⁵ and in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005), he complains “I don’t want to find my own sister snogging people in public!”, leading Harry to worry that if he does ever kiss Ginny he will be confronted by “Ron ripping open the tapestry curtain and drawing his wand on Harry, shouting things like ‘betrayal of trust’ ... ‘supposed to be my friend.’”²⁶ Nor is Ron alone in this: George says of the love potions: “But we’re not selling them to our sister, ... not when she’s already got about five boys on the go from what we’ve...” and Fred joins in with “you’re moving through boyfriends a bit fast, aren’t you?”²⁷ It is not surprising that Ron does not seem particularly reassured when Harry tells him that Hermione is “like my sister.”²⁸

Literary Influences

The Weasley boys’ interest in Ginny’s love life may possess something of the dependable quality of a running gag, but it also has sinister overtones. Why should Ron regard a relationship between Harry and Ginny as a ‘betrayal,’ a word charged with overtones of sexual infidelity? Is it because if Ginny were to be perceived as what Mrs Weasley is pleased to call ‘a scarlet woman,’ it would besmirch the family honour, or could there even be overtones of repressed incestuous desire? This may seem far-fetched, but there are other hints in the books of the threat of potential incest. In the first place, we are told that Harry’s mother Lily had “long, dark red hair falling over her face,”²⁹ a description that makes her sound strangely like his love-interest, Ginny. In the second, one of the Peverell brothers is called Antioch, and in the context of a story that obviously needs to be read on something more than a purely literal level, it may be pertinent that in Shakespeare’s and Wilkins’s play *Pericles*, Antioch is where the hero encounters a father and daughter who are in an incestuous relationship (the father is actually named Antiochus).³⁰ A Shakespearean allusion would be by no means an improbable thing to find in the Harry Potter books:³¹ one of the chapters in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* is entitled ‘Cat, Rat and Dog’, echoing the scurrilous rhyme about the followers of Richard III, “the Cat, the Rat, and Lovell our Dog / Rule all England under a Hog”;³² the

idea of a glance at *Richard III* seems confirmed when we encounter the statue of a humpbacked witch,³³ since Shakespeare dwells on the fact that Richard III was apparently a hunchback, and again when in *Harry Potter and the Goblets of Fire* the ghosts who emerge from Voldemort's wand encourage Harry and impede Voldemort, as the ghosts at Bosworth do to Richmond and Richard. Margaret J. Oakes compares the magic in the books to that of Prospero and Faustus,³⁴ and Eléonore Cartellier-Veuillen notes Rowling's fondness for Shakespeare (particularly *Macbeth* and *The Winter's Tale*), points out that Hermione spends much of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998) petrified, echoing her namesake in the play who poses as a statue, and that Ron becomes suddenly jealous of Harry and Hermione in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007).³⁵ When we read in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* that "still Harry stood frozen there, wand poised,"³⁶ he recalls the similarly immobile Pyrrhus and Hamlet, as well as foreshadowing Draco standing over Dumbledore, and two names gesture in the direction of the period in general: the Death-Eater Rookwood recalls the Bye-Plot conspirator Ambrose Rookwood,³⁷ and the names of two more Death-Eaters bring us strangely close to those of two possible contenders for Elizabeth's crown: "In 1565 Philip II wrote, 'Some claim is put forward by Lord and Lady Lestrage.'"³⁸ There are also, as I shall explore presently, allusions to the second tetralogy of *Richard II*, *Henry IV, Part One*, *Henry IV, Part Two*, and *Henry V*.

Another play of the period, though, seems to have been more directly influential. I want to suggest that one reason for the pathologisation of sibling relationships is that Rowling is influenced by a source which does not seem to have been previously recognised: John Webster's 1613 play, *The Duchess of Malfi*.³⁹ This might seem far-fetched, but *The Silkworm* (2014), the second of the Cormoran Strike books, written by Rowling under the pseudonym of Robert Galbraith, includes a number of chapter epigraphs from *The Duchess of Malfi*, and Robin's mother is studying it for her Open University course. My hunch would be that Rowling had read it well before that, for there are a number of striking correspondences between Webster's play and the Harry Potter books. Philip Nel points out that for at least one of her critics, "the core of Rowling's 'aesthetic troubles' is her tendency to read books other than fantasy novels";⁴⁰ I think *The Duchess of Malfi* is one such text.

As Cartellier-Veuillen notes, the Harry Potter books are in many respects detective novels;⁴¹ there is for instance a direct borrowing from Agatha Christie in that in her 1935 novel *Death in the Clouds* the poison used in the murder comes from the venom of a

boomslang.⁴² *The Duchess of Malfi* has a long tradition of influencing detective fiction.⁴³ P. D. James's *Cover Her Face* (1962) takes its title from *Malfi*, Dorothy L. Sayers' *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937) has a chapter epigraph from it,⁴⁴ and Patricia Wentworth's *Danger Point* (1942) alludes to perhaps its most famous quotation, "Her eyes dazzled."⁴⁵ Most systematically, in Agatha Christie's *Sleeping Murder* (1976), the heroine Gwenda is taken to see a production of the play by Miss Marple's nephew Raymond West and his wife Joan:

The play drew to a close, came to that supreme moment of horror. The actor's voice came over the footlights filled with the tragedy of a warped and perverted mentality.
'Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle, she died young ...'
Gwenda screamed.⁴⁶

She has recovered the memory of a murder she witnessed as a small child, which eventually proves to be that of a sister by her brother. She finally realises the truth about the murder when Dr Kennedy looks up the stairs at her and asks, "Is that you, Gwennie? I can't see your face ... My eyes are dazzled -."⁴⁷ Miss Marple's reaction to the discovery of Kennedy's guilt is focused on logic: she says,

I was stupid - very stupid. We were all stupid. We should have seen at once. Those lines from *The Duchess of Malfi* were really the clue to the whole thing. They are said, are they not, by a *brother* who has just contrived his sister's death to avenge her marriage to the man she loved. Yes, we were stupid.⁴⁸

Gwenda's thought is rather different though: "*Cover her face ... Mine eyes dazzle ... she died young ...* that might have been me ... if Miss Marple hadn't been there."⁴⁹ Gwenda's primary response is an emotional identification with the Duchess, reminding us that *The Duchess of Malfi* is a text with an affective as well as an intellectual pull.

In the Potter books too, one of the most basic ways in which *The Duchess of Malfi* contributes to meaning is by virtue of being one of the texts which the books are remembering. As Cartellier-Veuillen has shown, there are a great many of these, and their importance is underlined by the fact that memory and remembering play such a prominent part in the books. A Patronus, that vital protector against Dementors (amongst other things, an obvious metaphor for depression and perhaps also other forms of mental illness), can be summoned only by recalling a happy memory. Rowling's magical inventions also include two examples of technologies of memory: the Remembrall, which Neville's grandmother sends him, and the Pensieve, which Dumbledore keeps in his office. The Remembrall in particular seems modelled on the crystal ball, but it is reliable, while indicators of the future in the Harry Potter books are not (the Centaurs' conviction that Harry is doomed is unfounded; the prophecy tells a kind of truth, but ultimately proves only to predict what

might happen, not what *will*). Moreover, the books' whole structure is predicated on the idea that discovering what *has* happened is as important as discovering what *will* happen: we regress at the same time as we progress, with Harry recovering a little more of his past with every step he takes into the future. In this context, any text that is persistently echoed must also matter, and the echoes of *The Duchess of Malfi* are persistent indeed.

The Duchess of Malfi

The influence of *The Duchess of Malfi* is apparent in a number of ways. For Mrs Weasley, the Boggart in Sirius Black's house takes the shape of each member of her family in turn, lying dead. The Duchess of Malfi too sees deceptive images of her family apparently dead when her brother Ferdinand arranges for her to be shown wax models of them and told that they are real corpses. Harry spends much of *The Prisoner of Azkaban* seeing what is apparently a Grim, "The giant, spectral dog that haunts churchyards ... an omen—the worst omen—of *death!*";⁵⁰ in *Duchess*, we are assured that the ghost of an old woman is always seen before the death of a member of the House of Aragon.⁵¹ The Cardinal's advice that "Wisdom begins at the end" (I.i) is not dissimilar to the Snitch that opens at the end to reveal a truth, and the Cardinal's fear that he can see something in his fishpond becomes concrete in Harry Potter when the Durmstrang ship surfaces in the lake.

The majority of the parallels, however, centre on the figure of Ferdinand, twin brother of the Duchess. It is he who says "I have this night digg'd up a mandrake" (II.v.84), foreshadowing the importance of mandrakes in the plot of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, and he who would wish to see his sister's husband Antonio only "if I could change / Eyes with a basilisk" (III.ii.86-7); it is of course a basilisk that the Chamber of Secrets ultimately proves to contain. Ferdinand also asks

Can your faith give way
To think there's pow'r in potions, or in charms,
To make us love, whether we will or no? (III.i.66-8)

A love potion proves to have precisely that effect when it makes Ron become suddenly infatuated with Romilda Vane. In the great darkness scene where Ferdinand visits his sister the Duchess in the prison to which he has condemned her, Ferdinand holds out to her the severed hand of a corpse, which he tells her is his own hand and which she therefore kisses. When lights are brought and the deception is revealed the Duchess asks "What witchcraft doth he practise that he hath left / A dead man's hand here?" (IV.i.54-5), implying that the hand is not just a cruel trick, but resembles an object considered magical, and in Borgin

and Burkes, Draco Malfoy is attracted by a Hand of Glory,⁵² which indeed he later buys; traditionally these are made from the hand of a man who has been hanged. Ferdinand tells a story of Reputation, Love, and Death going on separate quests through the world:

Upon a time, Reputation, Love, and Death
Would travel o'er the world; and it was concluded
That they should part, and take three several ways.
Death told him they should find him in great battles,
Or cities plagued with plagues. Love gives them counsel
To inquire for him 'mongst unambitious shepherds,
Where dowries were not talked of, and sometimes
'Mongst quiet kindred that had nothing left
By their dead parents. 'Stay', quoth Reputation,
'Do not forsake me; for it is my nature
If once I part from any man I meet
I am never found again.' And so, for you:
You have shook hands with Reputation,
And made him invisible (III.ii.122-135).

This is not unlike the story of the Three Hallows, and culminates in a reference to being made invisible. Towards the end of the play, Ferdinand starts to imagine himself to be a werewolf (V.ii.6), foreshadowing Lupin, who really is one. Like Morfin Gaunt, Ferdinand tries to kill his brother-in-law, and his appearance in his sister's mirror is a dark foreshadowing of the Mirror of Erised.

More fundamentally, the whole issue of 'Marrying out' is central to both *The Duchess of Malfi* and the Harry Potter books. It seems clear in the play that Ferdinand is incestuously attracted to his sister, while in the Harry Potter books the name of Hermione points to *The Winter's Tale*, where incest is a submerged possibility (it is overtly present in Shakespeare's source). In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, we hear for the first time a word that is going to loom increasingly large as the books progress, when Malfoy calls Hermione "Mudblood." Ron, explaining it, adds, "It's mad. Most wizards these days are half-blood anyway. If we hadn't married Muggles we'd've died out."⁵³ Sirius concurs: "The pure-blood families are all inter-related ... If you're only going to let your sons and daughters marry pure-bloods your choice is very limited; there are hardly any of us left."⁵⁴ Some wizards cling to this madness, though. In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005), Dumbledore explains to Harry that "Marvolo, his son Morfin and his daughter Merope were the last of the Gaunts, a very ancient wizarding family noted for a vein of instability and violence that flourished through the generations due to their habit of marrying their own cousins."⁵⁵ The reason that the Gaunts have done this is to preserve their so-called purity of blood, and this is also an important consideration in *The Duchess*

of *Malfi*, where the Cardinal and Ferdinand are worried about “The royal blood of Aragon and Castile” (II.v.22).

The Harry Potter books also register a growing interest in the concept of royal blood. It is in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003) that a concern with royalty first surfaces, when Sirius says that his parents believed “that to be a Black made you practically royal,⁵⁶ and after that it never disappears. Looking at Moody’s photo of the original Order of the Phoenix, Harry reflects that they “were unaware that their lives . . . were drawing to a close,”⁵⁷ echoing, in a way unmistakable for anyone familiar with twentieth-century British history, the language of the official announcement of the imminent death of George V, “the king’s life is drawing peacefully to a close” (designed, according to legend, to distract attention from the monarch’s alleged last words, “Bugger Bognor”).⁵⁸ Almost immediately afterwards, Harry’s response to Hermione’s and Ron’s receipt of prefects’ badges is to dream of them wearing crowns, and a crown is also the symbol chosen by the Slytherin Quidditch supporters for their anti-Ron badge, which bears the words “Weasley is our King.”⁵⁹ Once back at school, Harry, Ron, and Hermione switch their allegiance from The Three Broomsticks to The Hog’s Head, whose sign of “a wild boar’s severed head”⁶⁰ recalls the tavern frequented by another young Harry with a big destiny, Shakespeare’s Prince Hal, who may also be remembered by the title of chapter ten of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, “The House of Gaunt,” since Hal was a grandson of John of Gaunt. Arthur Weasley, bitten by Nagini, finds himself on the “‘Dangerous’ Dai Llewellyn Ward.”⁶¹ According to *Quidditch Through the Ages*, Dai Llewellyn is as a famous player of the game; but, there was also a real Dai Llewellyn, whose brother Roddy was a lover of Princess Margaret’s, and both brothers were much in the papers when Rowling was growing up in the seventies.⁶² Finally, at the end of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Dumbledore notes his relief that when Harry arrived at Hogwarts “You were not a pampered little prince.”⁶³

In the next volume, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, the idea of royalty provides both the title of the book and a continuing source of metaphor. Dumbledore explains to Harry that Slughorn “has never wanted to occupy the throne himself; he prefers the back seat,” while Ron sneers to Hermione that if she goes to the party with McLaggen “Slughorn can make you King and Queen Slug,” and calls Harry Slughorn’s “little Potions Prince.”⁶⁴ In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Scrimgeour tells Harry “You may wear that scar like a crown, Potter, but it is not up to a seventeen-year-old boy to tell me how to do my job!” while Harry says of Marvolo, “as far as he was concerned, having pure

blood made you practically royal.” Kingsley’s pseudonym on *Potterwatch* is Royal, which draws attention to his true name, and gives his eventual elevation to Minister of Magic something of the flavour of a return of the king.⁶⁵ We also hear of Ragnuk I, whose numeral suggests that he is the only ruler we have met in the magical world, and Rita Skeeter writes that “The name of Grindelwald is justly famous: in a list of Most Dangerous Dark Wizards of All Time, he would miss out on the top spot only because You-Know-Who arrived, a generation later, to steal his crown.”⁶⁶

Royal Families

Perhaps it is not coincidental that the royalty motif should first emerge in *Phoenix*, since that was published in 2003, two years after Rowling met Prince Charles for the first time during her investiture with the OBE (indeed, the idea of the Order of the Phoenix might perhaps have been suggested in the first place by her receipt of the OBE). Perhaps too there might be a similarity to Rowling’s idol Jane Austen, who was informed that the Prince Regent would be gratified if she were to dedicate *Emma* (1815) to him and knew better than to disregard the hint, and there are certainly traces of Georgette Heyer, famous for her Regency novels, to whom Rowling has acknowledged a debt and from whom she borrows several names.⁶⁷ In particular, George was the name of the first four Hanoverian kings (including the Regent who is so prominent a presence in Heyer’s novels), while Frederick was the name of the lost Hanoverian heir, the eldest son of George II who predeceased his father. However, the focus on royalty is also a manifestation of the books’ growing interest in privilege; it is no coincidence that the motif of reference to royalty enters the series at almost exactly the same moment as Kreacher, most abject of House-elves, and that ideas about undue enfranchisement and undue disenfranchisement thereafter run concurrently.

The echoes of *The Duchess of Malfi* also have other consequences. One of the most profound of these affects genre. The Harry Potter books not only chart an excavation of the past, they also darken dramatically in tone. Rowling took the unusual decision of allowing her child readers to grow older relentlessly and realistically. For instance, there is a pointed contrast here with the Narnia books where ageing is rather melodramatically presented as radically incompatible with continued citizenship of the realm of the fantastic. Harry and his friends become teenagers, with concomitant outbreaks of hormones and irritability, and this affects the way the story develops. *The Duchess of Malfi* too can be seen as a story of what happens when three siblings grow into adulthood, developing new desires and new

loyalties which threaten the sibling bond and the configuration of the original family. When Ferdinand confronts the Duchess in her bedchamber, he shows her their father's dagger, and thus invokes not just patriarchy in general but her specific, particular status as daughter and sister: he and the Cardinal between them stand for law and the status quo in something of the same way as Percy Weasley does, except that Percy ultimately sees the error of his ways.

A second set of consequences arises from the fact that the Harry Potter books are negotiating English, rather than Italian, identity. However, the two are not so dissimilar as might be supposed. The Italy in which *The Duchess of Malfi* is set was several centuries away from unification, and was still fragmented into city-states and duchies. Moreover, the southern half of it was not Italian at all but was in effect a colony of the House of Aragon, to which the Duchess and her brothers belong, while characters such as Antonio and Delio come from the subjugated Italian population, lending the relationship between Antonio and the Duchess something of the flavour of a memsahib in the days of the Raj marrying a native, albeit a promoted one.⁶⁸ The Harry Potter books too are interested in the historical and social consequences of colonialism. In the first place, however improbable it may seem, they have, as I have already suggested, a significant interest in the *translatio imperii*. St Brutus' school, the Trojan name of Hermione (daughter of Helen and Menelaus, and thus intimately associated with the Trojan War), and the fact that Fluffy (the a giant three-headed dog) was given to Hagrid by a Greek all contribute to this, just as the sword in the water and the presence of an enemy named Draco confirm the presence of the Arthur story, a later link in the chain of descent from Brutus; the names Remus and Cassandra, foundational figures in the stories of Rome and Troy respectively, also point in the same direction. In the second place, Hermione's campaign to liberate house-elves has obvious echoes of real anti-slavery and equal rights campaigns; Sarah K. Cantrell argues that "the legacies of colonization, servitude, and slavery continue to haunt the wizarding world as much as they do our own."⁶⁹ Rowling, herself a former Amnesty International employee, is personally and prominently committed to liberal causes, tweeting strong and sustained support for the Labour party and putting her money—often quite a lot of money—where her mouth is on several high-profile occasions;⁷⁰ not for nothing has she declared a self-identification with Hermione. She has also openly declared that Dumbledore is gay, and the books feature a school named after Stonewall.

Rowling did not set out to write for children; famously, the figure of Harry came into her mind unbidden, and because he was a child the books had to be marketed for

children. They do of course contain many elements of the traditional school story, but Rowling was, as we have seen, committed from the outset to making the characters progressively older and the storylines progressively darker. To this end, she not only tackled death, killing off several important characters usually without warning, but also evoked the Second World War, which is clearly referenced in the story of Grindelwald, the Dark Wizard toppled in the same year as Hitler, 1945. In this too she echoes, if not *Malfi*, at least the modern reception of *Malfi*, at least in Rowland Wymer's account:

It has become commonplace in Marxist and feminist analyses of society and literature to see personal relations and family life as reproducing and enforcing oppressive political structures rather than opposing them or creating a free emotional space ... Yet those tyrannies with genuinely totalitarian ambitions (such as the regimes of Hitler, Stalin and Mao) have consistently viewed domestic loves and loyalties as threateningly independent of state power and a source of potential resistance. The extensive theorisation of the family as a source of oppression dwindles into insignificance when confronted with the actuality of state violence against the family. The scene on the road near Ancona—the little family group clutching a few possessions and confronted by armed men—awakens memories of a hundred newsreels.⁷¹

The Harry Potter books thus inevitably touch on one of the major debates of late twentieth-century criticism of early modern English drama, which is whether the plays are conducive to subversion or to containment.⁷² This is something on which Potter critics too have been divided. Sarah Cantrell notes that “If we read Hogwarts through the lens of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975), we see that despite its otherworldly charms, transfigurations, and enchantments, the school is a site where adults successfully train students to conform to the practices and expectations of the wizarding world,” but she also observes that some critics nevertheless “read Hogwarts as a place that deliberately destabilizes societal norms.” She herself proposes that

Hogwarts functions as a heterotopia, a space at once other and separate but also intimately connected to the world beyond its walls. Still more ambiguous spaces like 12 Grimmauld Place, the tent that Harry, Ron, and Hermione share in volume seven, and most notably, the Room of Requirement - a space within the place of the school proper - occupy positions similar to Deleuzian any-spaces-whatever. Because these spaces exist at the margins of safety and danger, their liminality requires Harry and his friends to be “up to no good”: to resist and subvert adult authority, but also to confront the limits of agency. These shifts from order to disorder and from safety to danger suggest that participation and activism - particularly on the part of young adults - can be powerful means of opposing the abuses that permeate the spaces in our own world.⁷³

The debate is particularly important because it concerns young readers, and ultimately centres on whether they are to understand themselves as able to change the world they live in or whether they must recognise that they are powerless.

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the odds are stacked against the Duchess: hers is a world in which men have the power and in which women are too often their victims (as is also frequently the case in detective fiction). Nevertheless, although the Duchess loses everything in worldly terms, she does retain her identity, famously declaring, “I am Duchess of Malfi still” (IV.2.141). This is the final way in which the Harry Potter books echo *The Duchess of Malfi*. Ultimately, all the appealing characters, and even Snape, do choose to resist Voldemort, implicitly subscribing to Dumbledore’s view that the prophecy predicts but does not prescribe, and that choice is always possible. Some of those whose choice to fight Voldemort die, but none of them forfeits either their identity or their reputation. As Sirius says, some things are worth dying for, but nothing is worth what Voldemort is reduced to when we see all that is left of his personality in the waiting room of a celestial version of King’s Cross Station, in marked contrast to the way the castle’s ghosts and Harry’s parents all retain an essentially conscious identity. Rowling does not promise success to those who fight, but she does very strongly affirm that fighting is both possible and worthwhile.

Rowling’s debt to *The Duchess of Malfi*, then, works in a number of different ways. Formally, given the various prominent echoes of *The Duchess of Malfi* in detective fiction, including (albeit later) in one of Rowling’s own Cormoran Strike books, it underlines the Harry Potter books’ affinity with that genre. In terms of content, the echoes of *The Duchess of Malfi* underline the books’ interest in two distinct but related topics, family (particularly siblings) and royalty, while the apparent contrast between the Italian flavour of *The Duchess of Malfi* and the resolute Britishness of the Potter books proves illusory, since both are underpinned by histories of colonialism and oppression. Finally, both *The Duchess of Malfi* and the Potter books can be seen to foreground the question of the potential for and limitations of individual agency. The Harry Potter books are widely and justly credited with boosting literacy and imaginative engagement among children, since they not only sold phenomenally well themselves but sparked the republication of authors for whom Rowling in interviews expressed admiration (most notably Diana Wynne-Jones, who published two further Chrestomanci books on the back of Rowling’s praise of her). Rowling encourages her young readers to do more than read, though: she also encourages them to believe that they, like Harry, Ron, and Hermione, can make a difference to the

world in which they live, and that even if they fail or are killed, they can still have an inviolate identity.

¹ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 153.

² J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 263.

³ On the vexed question of fidelity in adaptation see for instance Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006) and Robert Stam, "Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation," in *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Adaptation*, edited by Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 1-52.

⁴ Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 46.

⁵ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 178.

⁶ Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 63.

⁷ Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 144.

⁸ Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 64.

⁹ Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 149.

¹⁰ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 138.

¹¹ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 555, 565 and 561.

¹² Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 201.

¹³ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 447.

¹⁴ Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 12.

¹⁵ Letter to Cassandra Austen, 4 February 1813. It appears as Letter ix at "Letters of Jane Austen," <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/auslet22.html#letter125> (accessed 6 April 2018).

¹⁶ See the transcript of JK Rowling's World Book Day chat (held on March 4, 2004), <http://www.accio-quote.org/articles/2004/0304-wbd.htm>. Thanks to Eléonore Cartellier-Veuillen for alerting me to this.

¹⁷ Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 75, 80.

¹⁸ Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*, 367.

¹⁹ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 266.

²⁰ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 69.

²¹ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 106.

²² Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 7, 44.

²³ Rowling, *Goblet*, 394.

²⁴ Rowling, *Goblet*, 589.

²⁵ Rowling, *Phoenix*, 310-311, 763.

²⁶ Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince*, 268, 270.

²⁷ Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince*, 117-118.

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- ²⁸ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 308.
- ²⁹ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 280.
- ³⁰ William Shakespeare [and George Wilkins, *Pericles*, edited by Suzanne Gossett (London: Thomson Learning, 2004).
- ³¹ Beatrice Groves argues that Rowling is in fact particularly drawn to Shakespeare because his mixing of comedy and tragedy is congenial to her (*Literary Allusion in Harry Potter* [London: Routledge, 2017], 82).
- ³² William Collingbourne's lampoon is reproduced in Robert Fabyan, *Fabyans Chronicle newly printed* (London, 1533), ccxxvii: in July 1484, Collingbourne allegedly pinned the lampoon to the door of St Paul's Cathedral.
- ³³ Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 142.
- ³⁴ Margaret J. Oakes, "Secret Domination or Civic Duty: The Source and Purpose of Magical Power in Harry Potter," in *Reading Harry Potter Again: New Critical Essays*, ed. Giselle Liza Anatol (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2009), 143-156, 150.
- ³⁵ Eléonore Cartellier-Veuillen, "*Harry Potter*: Through the Looking-Glass of Language" (PhD thesis, Université Grenoble Alpes, 2018), 53-54, 178.
- ³⁶ Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 250.
- ³⁷ See Mark Nicholls, "Rookwood, Ambrose, c. 1578-1606," *NDNB*, 2004. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/24066> (accessed 6 April 2018). Rookwood's great-grandson, another Ambrose, was a Jacobite conspirator: see Paul Hopkins, "Rookwood, Ambrose (1664-1696)," *NBNB*, 2004. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/24067> (accessed 6 April 2018).
- ³⁸ Mortimer Levine, *The Early Elizabethan Succession Question 1558-1568* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 10.
- ³⁹ There might also be a glance at Webster's other play *The White Devil*, which mentions yew and blackthorn, both trees used for wands.
- ⁴⁰ Philip Nel, "Is there a Text in this Advertising Campaign?: Literature, Marketing and Harry Potter," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 29, no. 2 (April 2005): 250.
- ⁴¹ Cartellier-Veuillen, "*Harry Potter*: Through the Looking-Glass of Language," 191.
- ⁴² Agatha Christie, *Death in the Clouds* [1935] (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 61.
- ⁴³ Esme Miskimmin observes that "The play that seems to recur most frequently in detective fiction is John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*" ("The Act of Murder: Renaissance Tragedy and the Detective Novel," 286-300, 295).
- ⁴⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon* [1937] (London: NEL, 1977), 159.
- ⁴⁵ Patricia Wentworth, *Danger Point* [1942] (London: Coronet, 1984), 31.
- ⁴⁶ Agatha Christie, *Sleeping Murder* [1976] (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 34.
- ⁴⁷ Christie, *Sleeping Murder*, 288.
- ⁴⁸ Christie, *Sleeping Murder*, 297.
- ⁴⁹ Christie, *Sleeping Murder*, 303.
- ⁵⁰ Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 83.
- ⁵¹ John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. John Russell Brown (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974), V.ii.90-2. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.
- ⁵² J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 43.
- ⁵³ Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets*, 86, 89.

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- ⁵⁴ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 105.
- ⁵⁵ Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince*, 200-201.
- ⁵⁶ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 104.
- ⁵⁷ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 162.
- ⁵⁸ This seems to have been first reported in Kenneth Rose, *Kings, queens and courtiers: intimate portraits of the royal house of Windsor from its foundations to the present day* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985). See also <https://www.phrases.org.uk/quotes/last-words/king-george-v.html> , accessed 6 April 2018.
- ⁵⁹ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 163, 358.
- ⁶⁰ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 299.
- ⁶¹ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 430.
- ⁶² J. K. Rowling, *Quidditch Through the Ages* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 7.
- ⁶³ Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 737.
- ⁶⁴ Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince*, 75, 263, 350.
- ⁶⁵ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 110, 348, 356.
- ⁶⁶ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 409 and 290.
- ⁶⁷ See Cartellier-Veuillen, “*Harry Potter*: Through the Looking-Glass of Language,” 186n187.
- ⁶⁸ On early modern drama’s interest in the political divisions within Italy see for instance my “‘Absolute Milan’: Two Types of Colonialism in *The Tempest*”, *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies* 4 (1995), 1-10. On its applicability to *Malfi*, see my ‘Antonios and Stewards: A Conference about the Succession in *Twelfth Night*, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Tempest*’, *Journal of Drama Studies* 2.1 (January, 2008), 5-15.
- ⁶⁹ Sarah K. Cantrell, “‘I solemnly swear I am up to no good’: Foucault’s Heterotopias and Deleuze’s Any-Spaces-Whatever in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* Series,” *Children’s Literature* 39 (2011): 199. See also Brycchan Carey, “Hermione and the House-Elves Revisited: J. K. Rowling, Antislavery Campaigning, and the Politics of Potter,” in *Reading Harry Potter Again: New Critical Essays*, ed. Giselle Liza Anatol (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2009), 159-173.
- ⁷⁰ See for instance Philip Nel, who argues that Rowling “deserves credit for her attempts to control a marketing apparatus perpetuated by the American legal system” and lists some of the good causes to which she has donated (Nel, “Is there a Text in this Advertising Campaign?,” 241-243).
- ⁷¹ Rowland Wymer, *Webster and Ford* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 61.
- ⁷² The idea that the fundamental cultural work of early modern drama is the containing of potentially subversive ideas dates back to Stephen Greenblatt’s *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1988). It has been supported by American New Historicists and contested mainly by British Cultural Materialists. See for instance chapters 3 and 4 of my *Beginning Shakespeare* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).
- ⁷³ Cantrell, “‘I solemnly swear I am up to no good’”, 195-197.