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 **The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Resistance and
Complicity in *Matilda***

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Abstract

While Roald Dahl's *Matilda* offers a critique of oppressive, colonizing adult practices, it also makes clear the difficulty posed by the tyranny of gendered social scripts. Focusing both on historical and fictional parallels suggested by the text, this paper outlines the limited choices *Matilda* is offered as role models, highlighting in particular the way she is positioned as a double for Miss Trunchbull.

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Matilda is "a story about the struggle against tyranny," Mark West suggests in his full-length study of Roald Dahl (90). Yet criticism of Dahl's work has yet to take up in detail either the particular forms of "tyranny" evident in the text or the possible ramifications of a continuum between gender- and age-based forms of oppression. My intention here is to consider both questions with a focus on the ways Dahl's formulation of an idealized, resistant child in *Matilda* is complicated by the problem of adult female subjectivity. Both Lissa Paul and Perry Nodelman have usefully articulated points of contact between women's writing, feminist theory, and children's literature, highlighting the common preoccupation with repression and "wish-fulfillment fantasies of escapes from repression" (Nodelman 33). Paul, in particular, examines the possibility in children's literature of a heroine "unventing" herself—a phrase she borrows from feminist critic Annis Pratt—in order to understand and refigure the cultural (and narrative) plots that shape her destiny (200).

The concept of "unvention" could easily be applied to the child heroine Matilda, who reformulates her relationship to adult power in a way that seems to offer both the "wish-fulfillment" of tyranny overthrown and the possibility that girls can revise the social scripts available to them as women. It is certainly true that the five-year-old Matilda resents her father's imposition of normative assumptions about gender when he dismisses her intellectual powers and favors her less-gifted brother. As a close reader of the text, however, I am aware that in *Matilda* the liberatory potential of the child must be balanced against Dahl's depictions of adult female characters and against the embedded social and narrative structures by which Matilda is represented. Developmental research suggests that though many younger girls, from the ages of five to seven, do not place themselves within normative gender roles, this capacity for resistance erodes by the teenage years.¹ Though the character Matilda is still a

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