

# Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in JK Rowling's Harry Potter Series.

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## Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series

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### Abstract

In re-creating the venerable genre of the boys' school story, the Harry Potter series infuses twenty-first-century concerns with gender and sexuality into a literary tradition dominated by same-sex educational institutions. This incarnation of the school story challenges regressive constructions of gender and sexuality in its apparent treatment of boys and girls as equals, but heteronormative heroism ultimately squelches gender equality and sexual diversity in favor of the ideological status quo. Harry Potter offers itself as a series of queer texts, yet their queerness never fully overcomes their investment in cultural normativity.

## Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* Series

Tison Pugh and David L. Wallace

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In re-creating the venerable genre of the boys' school story, in which a middle-class boy is sent off to boarding school as he approaches adolescence, the *Harry Potter* series infuses twenty-first-century concerns with gender and sexuality into a literary tradition dominated by same-sex educational institutions.<sup>1</sup> The genre's typical focus on homosocial learning environments may appear to foreclose an interest in gender, yet as Beverly Lyon Clark notes of school stories, these narratives are "so marked by gender that it becomes vital to address questions of both the instability and potency of gender" within the genre (11). This tension between the uniformity of gender and its at times disruptive presence within the school story genre bears the potential either to undermine or to reinforce restrictive gender roles. In such a manner, the cross-gendered setting of Hogwarts in the *Harry Potter* books appears to be both a fantastically post-feminist world where sexism no longer undermines women's power and agency and one in which a post-feminist façade merely camouflages the novels' rather traditional gender roles and its erasure of sexual orientation difference.<sup>2</sup> This incarnation of the school story challenges regressive constructions of gender and sexuality in its apparent treatment of boys and girls as equals, but heteronormative heroism ultimately squelches gender equality and sexual diversity in favor of the ideological status quo.<sup>3</sup>

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**Tison Pugh** is an associate professor of English at the University of Central Florida. He is the author of *Queering Medieval Genres* and of numerous articles on medieval literature in such journals as *Chaucer Review*, *College English*, *Arthuriana*, *Philological Quarterly*, and *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching*. With Angela Jane Weisl of Seton Hall University, he is currently co-editing *Approaches to Teaching Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde and the Shorter Poems*; with Lynn Ramey of Vanderbilt University, he is co-editing *Race, Class, and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema*. **David L. Wallace** is a professor of rhetoric and composition in the Department of English at the University of Central Florida, where he serves as a member of the Texts and Technology Faculty. He has written numerous articles on literacy, critical pedagogy, queer theory, and empirical research methods, and with Helen Rothschild Ewald he is author of *Mutuality in the Rhetoric and Composition Classroom*.



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