

## Hermione's Gaze into the Mirror of Erised

Kiah Morris

In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the magical Mirror of Erised is a powerful symbol that offers readers in-depth perspectives on the characters who engage it. The inscription on the Mirror reads, "Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi"<sup>1</sup> (SS 207). Instead of merely reflecting them as they naturally are, the Mirror gives those who gaze into it a manifestation of their strongest desires. In this volume, Harry Potter and Ron Weasley both glimpse their imagined selves, but Hermione Granger is not invited to participate. This paper will address this exclusion by creating an imagined illustration of Hermione's reflection in the Mirror based on her representations in the first five volumes. To accomplish this, this paper uses the symbolism of the Mirror and its reflective and revealing abilities to discuss her desires. This framework will enable dialogue about the character Hermione Granger that centres her and creates possibilities for re-imagining her.

My intentions are to offer promising and dynamic representations of Hermione by using feminist approaches to knowledge and critique. I am particularly interested in the ways that Hermione's desires influence her actions and shape her responses to the world around her. Hermione's unique placement in the adventure tale as a gendered and racialized character produces complex desires that come into play through the text. This dialogue is important to the larger discourse about the Harry Potter series as it offers possibilities for reconsidering some of the more latent representations and sometimes problematic elements of Hermione's character and the real world associations that are written into the text as they relate to her desires and representations. Additionally, I can also assuage my concerns about how the series' audiences might internalize these representations by adding some new imagery to the mix.

Of our central trio of adventurers—Harry Potter, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger—Hermione stands out as one of the more competent, proficient and capable characters in the series. Many fans and critics of the series posit Hermione as a strong example of girl power and a model for emulation. It is not such an unusual project to consider Hermione as a living text with real world associations. There are existing discussions of the text-to-world associations that appear as subtexts within the storylines (Gupta, Gallardo-C), and I will engage a few of those insights in this paper. I will also draw direct examples from the texts, scholarly critiques of the Harry Potter series, and discourse used by scholars of Western Girl Studies. To conclude this project, I will literally produce an artist's rendering of Hermione's reflection in the Mirror that illustrates the potential desires this paper has read through and for her across the first five volumes.

### “Mirror, Mirror”

In *SS*, Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Albus Dumbledore and Lord Voldemort (via Professor Quirrell) all see images of themselves in the Mirror. As described by Dumbledore, the mirror “shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts” (SS 213). As an audience, we are told that the Mirror shows neither truth nor knowledge. But the power of the Mirror to peer into the soul and transform its secrets is telling, and I want to take a moment to reflect on what secrets are shared and how the Mirror speaks about those desires.

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<sup>1</sup> In reverse: I show not your face but your heart's desire.

As Harry stands in front of the mirror, he sees several members of his family (all of whom are deceased), including his parents, smiling, looking at him lovingly. Having been raised by the cruel Dursleys, he has yet to fulfil his basic needs of a sense of identity and belonging. These ancestors look back at him with expressions of knowing and reassurance that give Harry a sense of value and purpose.

The Potters smiled and waved at Harry and he stared hungrily back at them, his hands pressed flat against the glass as though he was hoping to fall right through it and reach them. He had a powerful ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness. (SS 203)

In Harry's final encounter with the mirror, in a showdown with Voldemort, he sees himself in secret possession of the Sorcerer's Stone, the one object that Voldemort wants and needs to come back into power and rule the world. Harry's courage and cleverness in saving the world from Voldemort once again makes him the ultimate hero, and with the added bonus of this new memory of his family and self that he will always be able to maintain. He sees his former family but cannot physically return to their care. He has a great deal of financial security provided through his inheritance but can only access it in the Magical world. He has only recently begun to have friends, and his celebrity cannot correct his loneliness. Harry knows that at the end of the school year, he must return to his former life of deprivation, humiliation and pain. In this way, I believe that Harry's desires for family, purpose and self appear powerful in their simplicity, because his unmet needs are so great.

As Ron looks into the mirror, he sees a reflection of himself alone, standing with pride as Quidditch captain, Head Boy and celebrating the winning of the House Cup. The text does not tell us specifically how he is able to recognize these accomplishments by looking at his reflection, but the inference is that it appears through insignia or regalia that he sees himself wearing or possessing. As the youngest son of a large Wizarding family, Ron seeks to prove himself as the competent, independent leader that he hopes to become. Dumbledore aptly explains this to Harry, saying, "Ronald Weasley, who has always been overshadowed by his brothers, sees himself standing alone, the best of all of them" (SS 213). Having the security of a loving family and a small measure of financial stability, Ron's greatest desires are to emerge from under his brother's shadows and create a name and space for his own achievements.

The only other characters who encounter the mirror, Albus Dumbledore and Lord Voldemort, engage it briefly. Dumbledore finds Harry returning into the night to obsessively stare into the mirror, but when questioned, Dumbledore tells him that his own reflection shows him holding a pair of woollen socks. The text does not clarify whether or not this was a ruse to keep Harry from knowing the truth, but this imagery could be loosely read as Dumbledore wanting the simplest of pleasures, pleasures that can easily be satisfied. Voldemort, who is using the body of Professor Quirrell to carry out his deeds, sees through this man's eyes being presented with the Sorcerer's Stone, the one object he seeks that can bring him back to power and give him eternal life.

Of all of the gazers, Ron's depiction implies the strongest use of symbolic imagery to illustrate what latent desires he holds. Using Ron's depiction as a guide, this conference paper will identify critique and discuss two categorical elements of Hermione's desires: heroism and

racial transcendence and acceptance into the Wizarding world in a similar fashion.<sup>2</sup> Within each category of desire, I will give descriptions of the corresponding representative symbols that she might see reflected in the mirror.

### **Hermione the Heroine?**

We begin this discussion of Hermione's desire by looking at the various ways that her gender (as it positions her in the text) enables or impedes her progress as a participant in the heroic storylines. As these are heroic tales, we can assume that Hermione would want to receive acknowledgement for the many noble efforts that she has and will continue to pursue for the betterment of both Magic and Muggle worlds. In the Magic world, the Order of Merlin is one of the highest accolades that an individual wizard can receive for their heroic service to the Wizarding community. Our first imagined image of Hermione in the Mirror shows her proudly wearing the badge of the Order of Merlin on her robes. Yet this imagining of her as holding a position of honour and recognition for her deeds runs counter to the ways that the text talks about gender and represents her as a girl.

As mentioned in the introduction, Hermione is considered to be a strong, moralistic, high achieving model of western girl power. This vision of girl power is described by Anita Harris in her book *Future Girl* as "The image of the successful and assertive girl in control of her own destiny" (Harris 21). However, as a character, Hermione frequently does not participate in the moments crucial to protecting that destiny, and often has to rely on the boys in her life to act with courage and cleverness to save the day.

Throughout the series, Hermione spends a great deal of her energy validating her self, seeking the approval of her friends and inclusion into their group, which is distinctly shaped by gender. Her inclusion into the group is not instated until late into *SS*. For most of this volume (and well into subsequent volumes), Hermione is written as a bossy, self-promoting, intrusive nuisance to the boys' mischievous and playful natures. Ron even cut into her, saying, "It's no wonder no one can stand her...she's a nightmare, honestly" (*SS* 172). After hearing this insult, Hermione disappears into an abandoned part of the school to cry in solitude and gets trapped in the bathroom with the giant Troll. Instead of using any of the many powerful spells she had learned, her wits, or even physical defence, Hermione remains frozen with fear and screams for help. The boys then hurry back to her aid and manage to incapacitate the troll to save her. (*SS* 172,175) She returns the favour by lying to the teachers about the reason that they were in that area after being previously instructed to go back to their dormitories and takes the blame for their collective disobedience. But Ron reminds us afterwards that she is still not quite their equal, "'Good of her to get us out of trouble like that,' Ron admitted. 'Mind you, we did *save* her'" (*SS* 179). The boys are able to use their cleverness, physical strength and magic to save the day, but Hermione is deliberately written into this moment as a damsel in distress whose only contribution is deceit (Rowling).

Earlier in the storyline, Hermione nervously studied flying tips from a book, *Quidditch through the Ages*, in preparation for their first broomstick flying lessons. "Hermione Granger was almost as nervous about flying as Neville was. This was something you couldn't learn by

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<sup>2</sup> This paper is part of a larger thesis project that also discusses Hermione's desires as they relate to equality and justice in the Wizarding world, peace and safety for her friends, and romance and desirability. For brevity, this paper is condensed to discuss the aforementioned sections.

heart out of a book—not that she hadn't tried" (SS 144). This knowledge could not replace nerves as she feebly attempted to command her broom into her hand.

"UP!" everyone shouted.

Harry's broom jumped into his hand at once, but it was one of the few that did. Hermione Granger's had simply rolled over on the ground and Neville's hadn't moved at all. Perhaps brooms, like horses, could tell when you were afraid, thought Harry... (SS 146)

While these examples show that Hermione is not written as one that will take physical risks or engage in altercations, I do not wish to denigrate the role of a heroine by claiming that the only acts of heroism are those that involve physical strength and agility. To give a feminist account of heroism, also I want to include non-physical acts within my definitions of heroic deeds as well. Even so, Hermione's intelligence, great problem-solving capabilities, magical genius and leadership qualities are trivialized by the text as less important to an adventure series than those that involve more elusive concepts of "courage" and "strength." I believe that is because she is a girl struggling to create a space in a boy's world. In this way, Hermione's great deeds are limited to the realms of the mind and spirit. Because of this, I want to discuss, challenge and transform some of the ways that she expresses her intelligence and morality to others.

In *PoA*, Ron's two older brothers Fred and George graciously give Harry the Marauder's Map. Harry uses the map to secretly sneak off to Hogsmeade and join Hermione and Ron. "'But Harry isn't going to keep it [the map]!' said Hermione, as though the idea were ludicrous. 'He's going to hand it in to Professor McGonagall, aren't you Harry?'" (*PoA-US* 198). Ron is envious of Harry's good fortune and supports his sneaking off, but Hermione is genuinely concerned that Harry has placed himself in danger by misbehaving in this way (*PoA-US* 238). It seems that some of Hermione's strongest loyalties are to rules, obedience and conformity and that she has difficulty allowing others to have even small measures of fleeting fun. Boys will be boys, but in this text the girl consistently takes away their proverbial toys.

Another strong example comes later in the volume when Harry is anonymously given his Firebolt racing broom. Hermione does not celebrate this gift with the rest of the group, but instead informs Professor McGonagall of its arrival. McGonagall then abruptly confiscates the broom for an indeterminate length of time to have it checked for jinxes and hexes. Harry is left heartbroken and Ron attacks her disloyalty:

"What did you go running to McGonagall for?"

Hermione threw her book aside. She was still pink in the face, but stood up and faced Ron defiantly.

"Because I thought—and Professor McGonagall agrees with me—that that broom was probably sent to Harry by Sirius Black!" (*PoA-US*, 232)

Hermione's "waspishness," as Rowling later describes it, also has a literally troubling side to it. In *GoF*, I found at several moments where Hermione literally takes sides with or defends the enemies they face. One of these moments places Hermione in alignment with their enemies, Draco Malfoy. When Malfoy verbally attacks Hagrid, for his seemingly poor choice in study subjects, Hermione retorts in his defence with a sharp-edged comment. Seconds later she retracts her bold action saying, "You know perfectly well, I only said that to shut Malfoy up... as a matter of fact, I think he is right" (*GoF-US* 198). This two-faced approach is dangerous in an

adventure narrative, and we never see Harry or Ron waiver in their loyalties or side with their enemies in this same way.

For all of her severity, Hermione also has several moments where she shows openness, caring and sensitivity to the needs and feelings of others. In *SS*, Neville Longbottom had a confrontation with Malfoy where Malfoy performed a leg locker curse on Neville as torture. As he hobbled impotently into the common room, unable to free himself of the spell, “Everyone fell over laughing except Hermione, who leapt up and performed the counter curse” (*SS* 159). As previously argued, these deeds of the spirit are dismissed and trivialized by the text in contrast to Harry or Ron’s acts of heroism. She treats Neville with dignity and sensitivity, yet it is Harry’s gesture late in the moment to give him one of his chocolate frogs that is treated as heroic. The text reads, “He gave it to Neville who looked as though he might cry” (*SS* 159). Here Hermione receives no overt praise or acknowledgement for her good deeds but later in the series through the S.P.E.W. and D.A. group storylines, she does have a few moments where she is allowed to shine a bit more.

Her acts of disloyalty are certainly troubling, but also can be read with complexity. Hermione’s actions mask her deep concern for the well-being of others. Hagrid’s choices of study subjects are often dangerous, and injuries occur on a fairly regular basis. Their practice in knowledge, care and handling of these creatures became invaluable for Harry during the Triwizard Tournament, but this was not something that Hermione could have foreseen. In the immediate, she saw that students were being injured. Had she been able to control this moment, no harm would have come to any of the persons involved. Hermione uses rationality and logic to come up with the best plan of action that will bring the safest results. Her concerns about Harry’s Firebolt and the Marauder’s Map were well justified, even if her responses were poorly timed.

### “A Credit to Her Race”

Hermione is not merely a gendered character, but also a racialized character through her Muggle heritage. I argue that Hermione’s overachievement and continual obedience to the rules set forth in the Magical world reveal a desire to transcend, or assimilate out of her less civilized, antiquated Muggle identity into a near perfected citizen of the Magical world. Hermione forges a disconnection from that past and the experience that she is creating for herself now. In *PoA*, she enrolls in a course called Muggle Studies to learn how Muggles are portrayed in Wizarding history. When Ron points out that she is a Muggle and has a wealth of knowledge through lived experience, she corrects her positioning by saying, “But it will be fascinating to study them from the wizarding point of view” (*PoA-US* 57).

Suman Gupta, author of *Re-Reading Harry Potter*, reminds us that the tension between the responses to Muggles by those associated with the Dark Side and those in opposition to their politics is strongly linked by both groups to a perception of Muggles as inferior beings who need to be either managed or exterminated. This use of power plays out in the subtle ways that the text pokes fun at the construction of the Muggle world and the lengths to which the Magical world goes to maintain the illusion of that Muggle world construction and in turn keep Muggles from discovering their Magical world. Gupta details many of these occurrences in the text:

[Both]...the Improper Use of Magic Office, Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office...in the Ministry of Magic are devoted to ensuring that magical acts and objects do not intrude upon the Muggle world; memory modifying spells are used

on Muggles extensively for that end; large magical edifices...are secreted away from Muggles by spells...

A great deal of effort is expended by the Magic world, in other words, to ensure that the illusion of what is normal and explicable in Muggle terms is maintained in the Muggle world. (89)

While the hysteria around witchcraft that arose in the real world during medieval times is alluded to in the text as a partial rationalization for the secrecy of their world (*PoA-US 2*), the notion that one group is actually controlling and manipulating the lives of another (even for the purpose of security) is disquieting. Gupta continues,

Against that alignment [Muggle extermination versus management] clearly stands the established order which is friendly to Muggles to the extent of taking the *trouble* of existing in the interstices of their world, and not interfering with them, and accepting those of the Muggle-born who have Magical qualities...into the fold. (101, emphasis added)

As such, the benevolent practice of the acceptance of Muggle-born wizards sets up a sense of exclusivity and privilege for those Muggles who are granted incorporation into the Wizarding world.

In these ways, Hermione's Muggle heritage certainly mirrors that of minority groups in the real world. The integrationist policies of the Ministry of Magic open the doors for the "genetically" disadvantaged and uninitiated members of the Muggle "elite", but it is up to them to promote their own ascension. Hermione, as a Muggle who has made great strides in this world as an outsider, becomes propped up as a credit to her race. Her exceptional achievements and obsessive pursuit of academic success can be informed partly by her acknowledgement of her positioning in this world as Muggle. She sees her entry into the Wizarding world as a point of privileged opportunity and fights to prove her worthiness to remain a member of this society.

As with whiteness, pureblood legacy is not a guarantor of success in anything, especially wizardry. Consider the struggles of one of her peers, Neville Longbottom, pureblood by birth, but inept at Magic from a low self-esteem. Their potions master Professor Snape, who regularly insults and intimidates Neville, venomously spits at the suggestion of his participation in a Wizarding duel with a classmate, "Longbottom causes devastation with the simplest spells. We'll be sending what's left of Finch-Fletchley up to the hospital wing in a matchbox" (*CoS-US 193*). Similarly, Malfoy, at the seat of absolute opportunity, is continually berated by his father for not living up to the potential that his birthright purports. "'I would have thought you'd be ashamed that a girl of no wizard family beat you in every exam,' snapped Mr. Malfoy" (*CoS-US 52*). Through the text we are told, it is the combination of good fortune, education and a strong work ethic that creates greatness and success in this world.

In these subtle ways, the text reminds us that the opportunities that are given to those, who by all accounts, may not be seen as deserving of them and whose acceptance is so tenuous, that high achievement is required. Hermione serves as the example of the ultimate achiever, the model minority, having overcome the limitations of her Muggle existence to reach those goals. She has good reason to push for assimilation, as the animosity and danger that threatens Muggles certainly places her and her family in grave danger.

My shift in critique here is not meant to set up an exclusive binary between race and gender, but to show the explicit ways that race works with gender to definitively shape Hermione's desires. In the real world, Harris sets up a precedent for this partnership stating, "I

suggest that young women are living more complex lives than the dominant images of girls' freedom, power, and success suggest and that class and race inequalities continue to shape opportunities and outcomes" (Harris 9). This is certainly applicable to our discussion of Hermione's representations and desire for assimilation and success. In my interpretation of her reflection, I see Hermione proudly wearing a badge that bears the insignia for the Department of Muggle Relations. As Voldemort's plans are set into motion, the conflict between the Muggle and Magical worlds will undoubtedly remove the secrecy of the Magical world, and ginger negotiations will be needed to mend both worlds. The memories of this war should not be haphazardly removed through memory modification spells. There is value in protecting the collective memory of this experience if social progress is to continue. Having crossed the bridge from one world to another, Hermione would stand in as an excellent ambassador and champion of this progress after the fact.

### Conclusion

As we have discussed, throughout the series, Hermione walks a fine line between incorporation and dismissal. Although she is considered to be one of the brightest wizards of her age, her character is undeveloped as a heroine largely in part because of her gender placement in the text. In spite of all of her strong qualities and abilities she is still often left as the damsel in distress, impotent in moments of danger and incompetent when she is poised to participate. She is the über-achiever, and rises to meet every challenge she is faced with, yet is threatened with literal extermination because of her Muggle heritage. She struggles to fulfil her desires, but true to form, her desires remain out of her reach. Hermione must find a place where she can be accepted and appreciated for all of the wonderful gifts that she possesses and shares. In my version of Hermione's reflection, I hope to give her that place and to offer another way to think about and enjoy this complex, dynamic character as she is, and not as she is often written to be.

### Works Cited

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