

# Alpenglow: Binghamton University Undergraduate Journal of Research and Creative Activity

---

Volume 7  
Number 1 *Alpenglow: Binghamton University Undergraduate Journal*

Article 6

---

11-30-2021

## Demigods and Gender Roles: Non-Heteronormative Gender Expressions and the Works of Rick Riordan

Lee M. Witkowski  
*Binghamton University*, [switkow1@binghamton.edu](mailto:switkow1@binghamton.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/alpenglowjournal>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Witkowski, L. M. (2021). Demigods and Gender Roles: Non-Heteronormative Gender Expressions and the Works of Rick Riordan. *Alpenglow: Binghamton University Undergraduate Journal of Research and Creative Activity*, 7(1). Retrieved from <https://orb.binghamton.edu/alpenglowjournal/vol7/iss1/6>

This Academic Paper is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in *Alpenglow: Binghamton University Undergraduate Journal of Research and Creative Activity* by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact [ORB@binghamton.edu](mailto:ORB@binghamton.edu).

## **Demigods and Gender Roles: Non-Heteronormative Gender Expressions and the Works of Rick Riordan**

### **Abstract:**

Gender serves as a powerful ideology to systematically oppress minorities, such as women and people within the LGBTQ+ community. This ideology is learned at a young age through media such as fantasy literature. By analyzing several fantasy texts through a lens of gender politics, I track the history of gender in the fantasy genre and posit that inclusive works such as those of Rick Riordan influence children and adolescents to become more accepting of sexual and gender minorities.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ+, children's literature, fantasy literature, masculinity, gender

### **Introduction**

Throughout Western history, society's constructs of gender have continuously changed, yet gender's ability to be used as a tool of oppression has earned it a place among the most influential ideologies of Western culture. Barbara Jeanne Fields (1990) argues that ideologies, like those surrounding gender and gender roles, are powerful tools of categorization created and sustained to help people make sense of the reality in which they live. However, while these ideologies can be helpful by providing structure to society, they do not necessarily correlate to the reality of existence. The ideology of gender, for example, creates a sexual regime which subjugates sexual and gender minorities on the basis that they are inferior. These ideologies are used to make large bodies of people, even the highly educated, believe the same false truths, since they can not be disproven (Fields, 1990). Despite the impermanence of gender roles and constructs, fascination over this ideology has permeated throughout Western culture: art, politics, and day-to-day life. Gendered ideas can be seen in everything from the different portrayals of men and women in Renaissance paintings to modern-day political debates over reproductive and

LGBTQ+ rights. The examination of gender through literature can provide insight into the gendered ideologies of the historic moment in which each text was written.

In this essay, I argue that positive representations of marginalized gender identities and expressions in young adult (YA) fantasy literature, such as the works of Rick Riordan, influence adolescents (ages 10-19) to be more accepting of their own gender identities and those of others, due to the pervasiveness of YA fantasy in youth culture. Therefore, representing queer identities within this genre has a huge impact on generational understandings of gender. I delve into the cultural understanding of gender and its history within the fantasy genre before focusing on Riordan's *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* (2015-2017) series. Analyzing his work through a lens of gender politics, I relate the fictional representation of gender to the role of gender in modern-day Western culture and examine how exposure to a variety of gender expressions in YA fantasy affects adolescents' understanding and acceptance of a variety of gender expressions and identities. Furthermore, I juxtapose the reception of the gender ideologies in Riordan's work to other modern-day works such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) series in order to highlight the types of gender representation that consumers of media wish to see in children's literature. For the purposes of this paper, I define "gender representation" as the way that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) and female characters are represented in a given work.

### **Gender as a Tool of Oppression or Liberation**

Let us begin by discussing gender and explaining how it functions. Like any socially constructed ideology, gender is, in the words of Judith Butler (1990), "an expectation that ends up producing

the very phenomenon that it anticipates.” That is, gender is a performance cued by the cultural assumptions of a historical moment. It has been assumed, and often is still is, that gender is equivalent to biological sex. However, this is not the case. In truth, biological sex — often defined as one’s chromosomes, genitalia, and secondary sex characteristics — has little to do with gender identity or its expression. As Butler has shown, gender identity refers to one’s inner mentality, “the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes” (Butler, 1990). Gender expression is how one performs gender, which may or may not align with biological sex or gender identity. These concepts refer not to biology, but to the way people present themselves in relation to the people around them.

Until Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), these concepts were largely unexamined in Western scholarship. In other words, gender identity and gender expression are relatively new topics of research and discussion due to the relative all-pervasiveness of the ideology of gender in Western culture. For this reason, people have often been hard pressed to understand the concepts of gender identity and expression, and instead tend to see gender as something that is assigned at birth, that falls into a male/female binary, and that remains stationary throughout life. In reality, none of these assumptions are correct (Butler, 1990). Nonetheless, they have been used as tools of oppression throughout much of Western history and to the present day.

As we see a push for transgender rights in contemporary times, the assumption that gender falls on a binary determined by biological sex has been used to discredit transgender and nonbinary identities. Opponents of trans rights argue that one’s gender is determined by physical characteristics, not just by perceived place in gendered culture. Furthermore, society devalues queer lives and experiences by drawing a line between LGBTQ+ individuals who act like



member, 30% had been threatened or physically attacked due to their identity, and 21% had been treated unfairly by employers (“A Survey of LGBT Americans,” 2013). These statistics show that the stigma fostered by cisheteronormative culture allows cishet individuals to treat queer people as less than human, negatively impacting everything from their interpersonal relationships with their own families, to their opportunities in the business world.

Queer individuals are not the only group of people diminished by society because of their gender expression, however, as the same ideology marginalizes women. In the eyes of history, femininity is seen as not a gender in and of itself, but the opposite of masculinity (Butler, 1990). Women, therefore, lack something essential that men possess. This ideology has historically been used to discredit the unpaid labor of women; their lives are exploited and deemed less important than those of men. They are considered a “free gift” to the capitalist economy, despite the fact that without the care work of women, economies would not function (Patel & Moore, 2017). This discrediting of women’s lives and work is a necessary product of the ideology of gender, since without the ideology of gender to persuade society’s mind that the subjugation of women is logical, the free labor they provide would be recognized as exploitation. However, gendered ideology is so ingrained within society that even with the knowledge of gender we have now, people still continue to discredit women’s labor.

That said, many people find gender to be a source of liberation in modern times. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich describes in her 2007 book how modern women adopted the phrase “well-behaved women seldom make history” as a slogan, despite it being a relatively throwaway line from an obscure scholarly article she had written. What made this line so appealing that it was used, in subsequent years, by “anarchists, hedonists, would-be witches, political activists...

and quite a few well-behaved women” (Ulrich, 2007)? Women have been told throughout history that their way to make a mark on the world is to make male babies, to be known as the mother of a great man. The idea of a “well-behaved woman” works off the history of oppression which required women to be virtually invisible in the background of patriarchal affairs. Modern women, therefore, look to historical women who were not seen as “well-behaved” — Joan of Arc, Lady Godiva, Rosa Parks — and use their lives as an example to find meaning and empowerment in their own gender (Ulrich, 2007).

Similarly, many queer-identifying people today find their identities to be a source of pride, as opposed to the shame that queer individuals were historically forced to experience. In a 2013 study, 34% of the 1,197 LGBTQ+ Americans surveyed stated that their queer identity was a positive factor in their life, with 58% saying that their identity makes no difference to them. Similarly, 92% stated that they believed society treated queer individuals better than it did 10 years earlier, and that it would treat them even better in another 10 years’ time (“A Survey of LGBT Americans,” 2013). From these statistics, it is evident that LGBTQ+ people have begun to see their identities in a positive light. Similarly to women sporting Ulrich’s “well-behaved women” slogan, queer people have come to display their pride through the rainbow flag. Whether it is waved in a Pride parade or draped as a wall decoration, the rainbow flag represents the steps the LGBTQ+ community has taken towards self-acceptance. This self-acceptance seen in women and queer communities would not be possible without media such as fantasy literature to teach audiences that non-heteronormative gender identities and expressions are not only acceptable but even valuable in the contemporary world.

## **Acceptance Through Literature**

Why is it important to look at gender in fantasy? Daniel Baker (2012) argues that fantasy has the potential to take the world and mold it to the author's wishes. If wizards can go to high school in Scotland or children can discover a magical world in the back of a wardrobe, surely political realities within these fantasy worlds can be changed to suit the author's ideal. Authors, therefore, use this liberating quality of fantasy to push for systematic societal change.

One area of change that many authors demand in the present day is justice for the LGBTQ+ community. Positive portrayals of queer characters in children's literature help children accept queer or non-heteronormative identities. To understand how, we must first look at the functional purpose of the representation of gender in mass media. Media makes up a large amount of the socialization of children and adolescents, instilling values in them that they will carry for the rest of their lives. Laurens Vangeel, Steven Eggermont, and Laura Vandenbosch (2020) discuss how exposure to sexualized media such as sitcoms, music videos, and pornography influence how adolescents understand their own romantic and sexual relationships. Consuming media that promotes narrow understandings of gender and sexuality fosters heteronormative beliefs in adolescents, such as the ideas that men are focused primarily on sex with no regard for emotional attachment, and that women are passive sex objects to satisfy men's desires (Vangeel et al., 2020). These beliefs, promoted by mass media, weave into the ideology of gender, setting concrete (hetero)sexual roles for men and women and leaving no room for deviation from the norm.

This observation extends even to LGBTQ+ characters in fictional media. There is a wide range of queer representation in media, from a complete absence of queer people, to an inclusion

only of queer people who act straight, to a representation that encompasses all manifestations of queer culture and identity. Lester (2014) notes that this middle ground of homonormativity — that is, representations of queer people who do not contest cisheteronormative ideals — is often found in contemporary children’s books. In these homonormative representations, queer characters perform socially acceptable behaviors such as gender conformity, monogamy, marriage, and reproduction. Books such as these present gender nonconforming queer characters as “scary” to children, while “normal” gay people are nonthreatening (Lester, 2014).

This approach is harmful to the children who read books with homonormative or poorly-represented queer and gender nonconforming characters. Queer, gender nonconforming, and cishet children all read these books and come away with an understanding of what they believe queer people should look like. If all the books they read portray “good” queer people as virtually identical to straight people and “bad” queer people as adopting gender expressions that do not match their gender identities, children and adolescents will believe that the only queer people with valid identities are the ones who look and act like straight people. Peguero and Williams (2011) found that “bullying victimization increases among... minority youth who violate discriminatory stereotypes.” Thus, this homonormativity in media leads to bullying gender nonconforming children in the classroom and schoolyard, but that is not all.

Recent studies suggest that, while only 5% to 10% of adolescents (aged 12-17) in the United States identify as queer, 20% to 40% of homeless adolescents identify as queer. This might even be an under-representation of the true numbers due to sampling bias (Page, 2017). Furthermore, before 2020, 2017 held the record for homicides committed against trans people, at 29 murders. Of all the hate crimes that year, 71% were directed at people of color, 52% were

against transgender people, and 40% were against trans women of color. This record was surpassed in 2020, with 35 recorded murders of transgender individuals by mid-October (Aspegren, 2020). Martha Augoustinos and Dana Louise Rosewarne (2001) claim that racial stereotypes are learned as early as the age of three and must be overcome with the development of anti-racist beliefs beginning around the age of seven. The prejudices people learn in their early youth surrounding all minorities, if not countered with the development of personal ethical beliefs, remain with them for the rest of their lives in the form of sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. These prejudices, while seemingly harmless in children, result in the disproportionately high rates of murder of trans women and trans women of color in particular (Apegren, 2020) when these children grow into prejudiced adults. Similarly, it is prejudice left unchecked that causes parents to throw their LGBTQ+ children to the street at similarly disproportionately high rates, as Page (2017) discusses. Therefore, the lack of representation to teach children that people with non-heteronormative identities should be accepted results in life-threatening consequences for the bearers of such identities.

Including positive representations of minority gender identities and expressions can teach children at young ages to respect people with these identities and help combat these statistics. However, Baker (2012) notes that the fantasy genre is not traditionally liberal. For example, the works of authors such as Chrétien de Troyes (c. 1180)<sup>1</sup> and J. R. R. Tolkien (1937) share similarly conservative views of gender. While each author depicts gender differently from the other — for example, while Chrétien’s work has many female characters with minimal power, Tolkien doesn’t include any women in *The Hobbit* — the way they represent it is congruent with

---

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that Chrétien was not a fantasy author, as the genre did not yet exist. However, medieval romances like Chrétien’s inspired what would later become the fantasy genre. Therefore, I analyze the representations of gender in his work alongside fantasy literature.

the sexual regimes of the historical moment in which each text is written. Before looking into how gender is represented in modern YA fantasy, we must first look into how gender has historically been represented in the fantasy genre.

### **History of Gender in the Fantasy Genre**

The Arthurian legends of the Middle Ages are a collection of Medieval romances which profoundly influenced what would later come to be known as the fantasy genre. Chrétien de Troyes's "The Knight with the Lion" follows the knight Yvain as he struggles first to avenge the honor of a fellow knight, and later to win back the heart of the woman he loves. While this story and the other Arthurian legends are not truly fantasy tales, they nonetheless had a huge impact on the trajectory of the fantasy genre, influencing the popularity of the quest trope that William W. Kibler (2001) discusses in his introduction to Chrétien's *Arthurian Romances*. This motif is found in a wide range of fantasy texts, including but not limited to the works of Tolkien and Riordan. Furthermore, the Arthurian legends are constantly adapted: retranslated, made into movies, retold in books. Their influence remains noticeably strong to this day.

"The Knight with the Lion" has a great deal to say about gender in the Middle Ages. Roberta L. Krueger (2005) argues that these tales were written at a time when gender roles were strictly defined, and women were expected to be subordinate to men. Most of the romances written in this period were by male clerics who wished to further male aristocratic ideas of the subjugation of women. However, as we will see below, some women within "The Knight with the Lion" have a good deal of authority. Chrétien's works were not the only ones to display

women in positions of power, however, even those in power were subject to the rules of chastity and sexual submission required for all women within the literature.

At the same historical moment, several different paths of masculinity were laid out for men. One of these paths was knighthood. Ruth Mazo Karras (2003) claims that knighthood centered around a “mythology of chivalry” which was perpetuated and romanticized by authors such as Chrétien, who wrote about idealized forms of masculinity in their romances. In reality, many knights did not or were unable to follow this code of chivalry; as in any historical moment, they “lived complex lives that did not always mesh neatly with cultural expectations” (Karras, 2003). Despite the complexity of reality, men were held to a straightforward yet ridiculously high standard, which Chrétien explores in his work.

“The Knight with the Lion” outlines both the masculinity and femininity of the Middle Ages through various characters. The difference between proper and improper masculinity is depicted through the juxtaposition of Yvain and a fellow knight, Kay. Kay is shown to demonstrate improper masculinity through insulting the honor of the members of Arthur’s court until he is rebuked by Queen Guinevere herself, saying, “I assure you, if [your tongue] were mine I’d accuse it of treason. A man who cannot learn his lesson should be bound before the choir screen in church like a lunatic” (Chrétien). This passage suggests that displays of respect are essential to proper masculinity, which can be seen in Yvain’s behavior. Yvain is polite among the court and concerned with the honor of the other knights. After his cousin tells the tale of his defeat by another knight, leading to his shame, Yvain responds with a promise to restore his honor (Chrétien). This tale outlines that the good man is honest, respectful, and gains honor through physical capability, while the bad man is dishonest and puts other men down with words.

Female gender roles, according to “The Knight with the Lion,” are a bit looser. Generally in Chrétien’s tales, the female character’s sole purpose is to support the man, giving the male knight instructions to reach his goal or having him prove his honor by aiding her. Yet, there are also characters, like Queen Guinevere, who have their own authority. As queen, Guinevere has political power and commands the respect of the knights of Arthur’s court. Furthermore, as seen in the scene described above, Guinevere has freedom to speak as she chooses to the knights and determine whether their practices of masculinity are proper or improper for the time. Ultimately, the authority of women in this story relies heavily on their relationship to the men.

J.R.R. Tolkien, often considered to be the father of modern fantasy, is similarly influential within the fantasy genre. He popularized elves and invented the hobbit, and most Western fantasy written after Tolkien borrows at least some of its ideas from *The Lord of the Rings*. Despite being a Medieval scholar, Tolkien held a very different opinion of women from Chrétien. Tolkien’s writings were highly influenced by World War II and the social and political climate that surrounded it. John Miller (2016) argues how the gendered ideology found within Tolkien’s works can be seen as a reflection of the gender politics of the 20th century. During the 20th-century wartime, the military work needed to maintain the British empire was more dirty and brutal than what men faced in peacetime, so the literature of Tolkien’s generation began to portray this “harder-nosed masculinity” which he would write into his books. Tolkien himself lived through the grit and grime of war as he was writing; these experiences directly influenced the gendered ideologies found in his works.

Not only did Tolkien write in a time of war, he also wrote during the period of gendered unrest that stemmed from the first wave of feminism seen in the late 19th and early 20th

centuries. Pamela Paxton, Melanie M. Hughes, and Jennifer L. Green (2006) discuss how, during this period, women fought for suffrage and economic equality, which caused insecurity among the male sex. While the first wave of the women's movement didn't directly aim to challenge the patriarchy, it did advocate for equal political power between the two binary genders (Paxton et al., 2006). Tolkien undoubtedly was well aware of these strides in women's rights and equality and, feeling threatened by them, wrote women out of *The Hobbit* and included only stereotypes in *The Lord of the Rings*.

For these reasons, though *The Hobbit* was published in 1937, approximately 800 years after "The Knight with the Lion," it regressed in its representation of gender. While, as previously discussed, the Arthurian legends contain many female characters, some of whom even have impressive amounts of authority, *The Hobbit* has virtually none. All of the characters who are given any role within the story are male. One of the few named female characters is Belladonna Took, the mother of Bilbo Baggins, who does not have any role in the narrative and is only mentioned to explain Bilbo's desire for adventure.

As with Chrétien's work, it is easy to see Tolkien's ideas of proper and improper masculinity, which he outlines through the distinction between the dwarves and the hobbits. Hobbits are disinclined to adventure, and the members of the Took family "were not as respectable as the Bagginses" (Tolkien, 1937) on account that they like to partake in adventure. It is the domesticity of the hobbits, Tolkien outlines, that sets hobbits apart from the adventure-loving dwarves. Throughout the novel, Bilbo is forced into an adventure of his own, coming to appreciate it as much as his Took mother did. Given Bilbo's mental transformation, it is safe to assume that Tolkien considers a proper man to be one who loves adventure, one who is

willing to get his hands dirty instead of sitting around all day. This unbendable ideal of masculinity would change in the coming decades as the fantasy genre, exemplified by the work of Rick Riordan, would begin to adopt a wider and more flexible range of acceptable roles for every gender.

### **Gender Representation in Modern Fantasy**

Since the late 20th century, the fantasy genre has started moving towards more progressive portrayals of gender than the texts previously discussed, due to the reciprocal relationship between author and reader in contemporary fantasy. No longer do the large majority of consumers consider gender a source of shame or oppression; instead, they find gender — including queer identities — to be a source of pride. Therefore, they demand to see their identities represented fully in the stories they read. When consumers of a medium want to see a certain type of representation, producers are compelled to comply or risk losing their audience. This dynamic can be seen in the response to the attitudes of J.K. Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) series.

Like Tolkien before her, J.K. Rowling revolutionized the fantasy genre, making it mainstream to write fantasy for children and adolescents, with 500 million copies across all seven books of her series sold between 1997 and 2018. It is estimated that one in fifteen people in the world owns a *Harry Potter* novel, illustrating just how pervasive the series is in global adolescent culture (“500 Million Harry Potter Books Have Now Been Sold Worldwide”). Their popularity makes them a powerful tool to spread ideologies across a wide audience.

The *Harry Potter* books demonstrate a great deal of feminist ideology in comparison to the texts previously discussed. As Tolkien responded negatively to first wave feminism, Rowling was influenced by second wave feminism. This wave of feminism pushed for greater equality between men and women in terms of politics, reproductive rights, and the contestation of patriarchy on a broader scale (Paxton et al., 2006). Rowling was empowered by the increasing rights of women, and she wrote this empowerment into the characters of her series. For example, her character Hermione Granger is not defined by her relationship to the men around her, despite being the titular Harry Potter's good friend. Hermione is strong in her own right and uses her intelligence to save the other protagonists from peril after peril.

Yet Rowling's progressive ideas of gender stop at feminism. The *Harry Potter* novels do not attempt to represent LGBTQ+ characters. Rowling, however, claims representation of non-normative identities within her novels where there is none. In a question-and-answer session in October 2007, just months after the release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Rowling claimed that Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts and mentor to Harry, was gay all along (Smith, 2007). She provided no context for his sexuality within the books and, furthermore, did not depict the romantic relationship between Dumbledore and his supposed lover, Grindelwald, in the *Fantastic Beasts* (2016-2018) films that depict their relationship.

Albus Dumbledore is a pillar of the homonormativity that Lester outlines. As previously discussed, Dumbledore's behavior does nothing to hint at his sexuality. He looks and acts like a cis het male, following the cultural and behavioral norms of masculinity within the wizarding society that Rowling has constructed. His lack of a partner makes him entirely nonthreatening to the heterosexual reader. Dumbledore's presumed sexual identity remains invisible, page after

page. The reader learns little about his personal life beyond what is necessary to further Harry's story. Thus, Rowling is able to sideline his identity to the extreme. Fans of the series did not have a hint that Dumbledore was gay until she answered a direct question about his sexuality.

Rowling's failure to include queer identities is not just a product of passive ignorance about the needs of her queer readers. She has used her Twitter platform to actively promote transphobic ideologies, stating in a 2019 tweet, "Dress however you please. Call yourself whatever you like... But force women out of their jobs for stating that sex is real?" (Rowling, 2019). This was in response to the firing of Maya Forstater from the position of tax expert at the think tank Center for Global Development, after she refused to acknowledge the gender identities of transgender women. This statement was one among a history of Rowling's transphobic tweets, which have received a strong backlash from *Harry Potter* fans, media outlets, and human rights organizations alike (Lewis, 2019). Rowling is now widely considered to be a TERF, a trans-exclusionary radical feminist, whose transphobic ideologies are expressed in her books through her omission of transgender (and otherwise queer) characters. She ignores opportunities for representation, ensuring that "no pop stars of ambiguous genders, along the lines of David Bowie or Boy George, populate the wizarding bands... single adults who move to coupled status do so only with members of the opposite sex; and [no Hogwarts students] have two mommies or two daddies" (Pugh & Wallace, 2006), despite many students' parents being featured in the text. As it became clear that these omissions stemmed from Rowling's active dislike of the queer community, fans of her work began to lose respect for its author.

Just years after the release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), Rick Riordan began to write acceptance explicitly into his books, sparking respect and admiration

from his fans. Riordan begins his fabrication of an elaborate franchise of novels with his *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005-2010) series, in which the ancient gods of various mythologies are alive and active in the contemporary world. The *Percy Jackson* series, which introduces readers to the Greek gods and their demigod — or, half god, half human — children, looks much like *Harry Potter* in its gender representation. There are no openly queer characters, yet there are complex female characters who display their strength in a variety of ways. Riordan would have a long way to go before becoming the pillar of progressive ideology that he is today.

It is with the *Heroes of Olympus* (2010-2014) series that the reader sees the start of what would become Riordan's radical perspective. In the penultimate book of the series, *The House of Hades* (2013), Nico di Angelo, the reclusive son of Hades introduced during the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series, is confronted by the love god Eros and forcibly outed as being in love with the titular Percy Jackson. The reader sees Nico, who grew up in 1940's Italy and was preserved as the same age by magic, struggle to accept who he is, outcast — or so he imagines — as not only a son of Hades, but a homosexual as well. By the end of the series, and continuing into the *Trials of Apollo* (2016-2020) series, Nico is shown as happy and comfortable in his own skin, hand in hand with his boyfriend, Will Solace, a son of Apollo.

The full extent of Riordan's progressive ideas can be seen in the *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* (2015-2017) trilogy, which takes place in the same universe of novels but features Norse mythology instead. The series follows Magnus Chase, the son of the Norse god Frey, as he tries to prevent the god Loki from starting Ragnarok, the end of the world. In all of the series leading up to this one, but especially in *Magnus Chase*, Riordan purposefully subverts traditional gender roles in his characters. Magnus, for example, is nothing like the knights of

Arthur's court or the dwarves of Middle-Earth who gain honor in combat. On the contrary, he defeats Loki in a battle of rhetoric, a refusal to fight which would be considered an improper display of masculinity by the authors previously discussed. The powers he inherited from his father are traditionally feminine: he is the team's healer, as opposed to its fighter. Furthermore, his pansexual identity is made explicit in the text. Not only does Magnus not conform to heteronormative gender roles, he is distinctly a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

Riordan presents an opposite but equally progressive argument through the character of Samirah "Sam" al-Abbas, the Valkyrie who brings Magnus to Valhalla after his death in the first book. Instead of depicting Sam subverting gender roles, she is shown to be content following the traditions of her family and her Muslim faith. She wears a hijab and is happy in an arranged marriage, two issues that are hotly debated in modern culture. Riordan's inclusion of Sam's character and her individual expression of gender addresses one side of the contemporary arguments: there is no one way for women to be or feel liberated, and Western ideas of feminism are not necessarily a fit for everybody.

Riordan takes his argument about gender further still with the character of Alex Fierro. Alex is the child of Loki who, just like her/his parent, is genderfluid. That is, at certain times, Alex identifies as male, and at other times as female. As a genderfluid character, Alex represents the epitome of detachment from gender that Butler describes: "When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice" (Butler, 1990) in which someone with a male body may identify as female, and vice versa. Riordan never states whether Alex is biologically male, female, or intersex; for all intents and

purposes, it does not matter. Alex is freed from gendered constraints within the story, acting alternately masculine and feminine regardless of her/his gender at any given moment.

The other characters within the series almost always react to Alex's identity with acceptance, emphasizing Riordan's vision of a world in which people of marginalized genders are completely accepted by those around them. After Alex first switches from male to female pronouns shortly after her/his introduction, the characters act with understanding, if not necessarily grace: "'She it is!' T.J. interceded. 'I mean, she *she* is.' He rubbed his neck... 'Let's get to battle!'" (Riordan, 2016). Alex's gender is not what matters, but instead her/his proficiency fighting monsters in preparation for the final battle of Ragnarok.

Magnus's immediate reaction upon finding out that Alex is genderfluid is equally noteworthy. Magnus thinks to himself,

The gender thing wasn't what surprised me. A huge percentage of the homeless teens I'd met had been assigned one gender at birth but identified as another, or they felt like the whole boy/girl binary didn't apply to them. They ended up on the streets because—shocker—their families didn't accept them. Nothing says 'tough love' like kicking your non-heteronormative kid to the curb so they can experience abuse, drugs, high suicide rates, and constant physical danger (Riordan, 2016).

Riordan writes in the same cultural moment as Rowling, yet he tries significantly harder to incorporate authentic queer stories into his books. Both Riordan and Rowling write under the pressure of the cultural aftereffects of the Stonewall riots of 1969. These riots sparked the tradition of June as LGBTQ+ Pride Month, leading to increased visibility of the queer community. Both authors were alive during the AIDS crisis, which peaked in the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, with half a million reported cases in the United States by 1995 and 50,877 deaths in that year alone (Osmond, 2003). Thus, both authors were undoubtedly aware of the pleas of the

queer community for full and positive representation in the media they consume. While, as discussed previously, Rowling ignores these cries for representation, it is clear from Alex's introduction in *Hammer of Thor* (2016) that Riordan not only understands the trouble faced by genderqueer kids, but wants to educate his readers on the subject as well.

The American Library Association's Rainbow Round Table recognized his genuine desire to include genderfluid representation, honoring *The Hammer of Thor* with the Stonewall Book Award in 2017 for the representation of Alex's gender identity. In his acceptance speech, Riordan outlined his reasoning behind including queer characters, stating, "it's also important that LGBTQ kids see themselves reflected and valued in the larger world of mass media, including my books" (Riordan, 2017). Riordan comes from a background of teaching young students, many of whom were queer. In his acceptance speech, he reflected on how he created many of his queer characters for his students. He wrote Nico for his gay students whose "struggles were greater, their perspectives more divergent than some of my other students" (Riordan, 2017). He wrote Alex for a student who was assigned male at birth, but who, in every other way, was a girl, yet did not have the language to identify as such when Riordan was teaching them in the 1990s. Riordan stresses that for queer children to feel safe, they must feel accepted and known by the adults in their lives, and by the media they consume.

It is important for children and adolescents to be exposed to the juxtaposition of characters like Magnus, Sam, and Alex, fostering an understanding of the different ways people express their genders. "Children's literature, as a vehicle of cultural communication that can inform foundational aspects of children's belief systems, can help combat dangerous discourse by instilling at a young age ideas of social justice and equity for all people" (Lester, 2014).

Through reading characters like Riordan's, children see that a variety of gender expressions are acceptable, and that these expressions may not necessarily line up with gender identity or biological sex. Queer children are given the opportunity to see characters like themselves represented in widely-consumed media, which allows them to come to terms with their identities. Seeing beloved characters living happy lives and being comfortable in their identities helps queer adolescents grow to be proud of their own identities. Riordan's characters provide hope for a bright future in which they are accepted and loved by society and themselves.

## **Conclusion**

Positive media portrayal of gendered identities such as those found in Riordan's novels can lead children to be more accepting of themselves and others. It is, furthermore, easy to understand why Riordan has received relatively little negative feedback compared to J.K. Rowling. Western culture is progressing to a point where many people have come to understand the importance of positive representations of gender in children's media. They recognize the effect it has on children, and they wish for children to grow up to be accepting of people of all gender identities and expressions and sexual orientations. This is a profound difference from the fantasy media before the late 20th century. In the works of Tolkien and Chrétien, gender was portrayed in accordance with the heteronormative views of each historic moment. Surrounded by those stories, people would be unable to break free from the gendered ideals they present, in congruence with the ideals presented by the other mass media of the time.

Rick Riordan's works foretell a bright future for gender representation in the fantasy genre. Inspired by him, other authors will undoubtedly step forward with their positive

representations of queer characters and relationships, in addition to continuing the tradition of representing strong female characters. Seeing these characters represented in YA fantasy, children and adolescents will continue to grow more accepting, and the world will become a better place for queer and gender nonconforming individuals, making it better for everyone. Liberation for one group leads to liberation for all.

## References

- 500 million Harry Potter books have now been sold worldwide. (n.d.). Wizarding World.  
Retrieved November 24, 2020, from  
<https://www.wizardingworld.com/news/500-million-harry-potter-books-have-now-been-sold-worldwide>.
- A survey of LGBT Americans. (2013, June 13). *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*.  
<https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/13/a-survey-of-lgbt-americans/>.
- Augoustinos, M., & Rosewarne, D. L. (2001). Stereotype knowledge and prejudice in children. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 19(1), 143–156.  
<https://doi.org/10.1348/026151001165912>.
- Baker, D. (2012). Why we need dragons: The progressive potential of fantasy. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 23(3 (86)), 437–459. JSTOR.
- Butler, J. (2006). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Chrétien, & Owen, D. D. R. (2001). *Arthurian romances*. Dent; Charles E. Tuttle.
- Fields, B. J. (1990). Slavery, race and ideology in the United States of America. *New Left Review*, 1(181).  
<https://newleftreview.org/issues/I181/articles/barbara-jeanne-fields-slavery-race-and-ideology-in-the-united-states-of-america>.
- Karras, R. M. (2003). *From boys to men: Formations of masculinity in late medieval Europe*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Kibler, W. W. (2001). Introduction. In *Arthurian Romances*. Dent; Charles E. Tuttle.

Krueger, R. L. (2005). *Women readers and the ideology of gender in old French verse romance*. Cambridge University Press.

Lester, J. Z. (2014). Homonormativity in children's literature: An intersectional analysis of queer-themed picture books. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 11*(3), 244–275.

Lewis, S. (2019, December 19). *J.K. Rowling facing backlash after supporting researcher who lost her job over transphobic tweets*. CBS News.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jk-rowling-maya-forstater-backlash-support-researcher-fired-over-transphobic-tweets-2019-12-19/>.

Maya Forstater: Woman loses tribunal over transgender tweets. (2019, December 19). *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-50858919>.

Miller, J. (2016). Mapping gender in Middle-Earth. *Mythlore, 34*(2), 133–153.

Osmond, D. H. (2003). *Epidemiology of HIV/AIDS in the United States*. HIV InSite.

<http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/inSite?page=kb-01-03>.

Page, M. (2017). Forgotten youth: Homeless LGBT youth of color and the runaway and homeless youth act. *Northwestern Journal of Law & Social Policy, 12*(2).

Patel, R., & Moore, J. W. (2017). *A history of the world in seven cheap things: A guide to capitalism, nature, and the future of the planet*. Oakland, California.

Paxton, P., Hughes, M. M., & Green, J. L. (2006). The international women's movement and women's political representation, 1893–2003. *American Sociological Review, 71*(6),

898–920. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240607100602>.

Peguero, A., & Williams, L. (2011). Racial and ethnic stereotypes and bullying victimization.

*Youth & Society, 45*, 545–564. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X11424757>.

- Pugh, T., & Wallace, D. L. (2006). Heteronormative heroism and queering the school story in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 31(3).  
<http://muse.jhu.edu/article/204892>.
- Riordan, R. (2013). *The House of Hades* (First edition). Disney-Hyperion Books.
- Riordan, R. (2016). *The Hammer of Thor*. Disney-HYPERION.
- Riordan, R. (2017a). *The Ship of the dead* (First Edition). Disney-HYPERION.
- Riordan, R. (2017b, June 26). *The Stonewall Award*. Rick Riordan.  
<https://rickriordan.com/2017/06/the-stonewall-award/>.
- Smith, D. (2007, October 21). *Harry Potter character Dumbledore was gay, JK tells amazed fans*. The Guardian. <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/oct/21/film.books>.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. (2012). *The hobbit, or, there and back again* (1st Mariner Books ed., 75th anniversary ed). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Ulrich, L. (2008). *Well-behaved women seldom make history*. Vintage Books.
- Vangeel, Laurens, Steven Eggermont, and Laura Vandenbosch. Does Adolescent Media Use Predict Sexual Stereotypes in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood? Associations with Music Television and Online Pornography Exposure. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 49.4 (2020): 1147-161. Print.