



## The Liberty Tree and the Whomping Willow: Political Justice, Magical Science, and Harry Potter

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There is one thing that political institutions can assuredly do, they can avoid positively counteracting the true interests of their subjects. But all capricious rules and arbitrary distinctions do counteract them. There is scarcely any modification of society but has in it some degree of moral tendency. So far as it produces neither mischief nor benefit, it is good for nothing. So far as it tends to the universal improvement of the community, it ought to be universally adopted.

—William Godwin *Enquiry (Concerning Political Justice*, I, 137)

Everyone from the Minister for Magic downwards has been trying to keep famous Harry Potter safe from Sirius Black. But famous Harry Potter is a law unto himself. Let the ordinary people worry about his safety! Famous Harry Potter goes where he wants to go, with no thought for the consequences. . . How extraordinarily like your father you are, Potter. . . He, too, was exceedingly arrogant. A small amount of talent on the Quidditch pitch made him think he was a cut above the rest of us, too.

—Severus Snape to Harry Potter (*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, 209)

Is Harry Potter a radical? Is the titular hero of J. K. Rowling's unbelievably successful series really, as the Potions Master, Severus Snape, deems him, nothing more than an arrogant "law unto himself," or does his choice to use his magic skills in the fight against the ultimate evil, Lord Voldemort, fully justify his frequent flouting of regulations and restrictions, even those established for his own protection? Rebecca

Skulnik and Jesse Goodman have argued that Harry “constructs his own civic heroism” (Heilman 263) at Hogwarts; in their view, the Potter novels teach that “one can become a civic leader without having to reconstruct the institution’s hegemonic structure” (272). Yet Harry’s growing disgust with, and alienation from, the very world he seems to have been chosen to save undermines his civic leadership. Skulnik and Goodman suggest that Harry “does not question the basic justice of his world or school” (263); however, on numerous occasions he is forced to do exactly that. In fact, Rowling uses Harry’s problematic status to reveal broader concerns about discipline, political justice, and the study of the rigid and exacting science of magic.

What began as a series of imaginative mystery/adventure stories set in this enigmatic castle has, during the course of the five published volumes through 2004, unfolded a metanarrative that has expanded beyond the confines of Hogwarts. The five Potter novels published up to 2004,<sup>1</sup> although relatively self-contained, comprise a lengthy *Bildungsroman* that traces the development of the hero from eleven to fifteen. As Harry matures, his knowledge of the wizarding world grows, as does his understanding of his role as “the Boy Who Lived,” the adversary of Lord Voldemort and the upholder of values which, one suspects, must ultimately save the wizarding world. At the same time, Rowling has also brought this metanarrative away from the fantasy adventure of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* and more firmly into the realm of political fiction. While magic remains central to the world in which Harry moves, the delight in magic for its own sake has given way to larger questions about the uses to which magic should be put, and, more important, to the way the magical world is organized, especially given the threat posed by the return of Lord Voldemort at the end of book 4 and throughout book 5. While Rowling has touched on political and social themes in the earlier novels,<sup>2</sup> *Order of the Phoenix* marks the point where the Ministry of Magic and its endless assortment of departments and hierarchies assume a central role in the narrative. Given Harry’s immense popularity among children and adult readers, and his unquestioned status as a hero to many, it is appropriate to examine Rowling’s critique of the institutions of power in the wizarding world, and Harry’s place as a heroic resistance figure, on the side of moral right, but not necessarily on the side of order and conformity.

Rowling employs two distinct paradigms to establish Harry as hero. The first, centered on Harry’s ongoing battle with Voldemort, encompasses the overall, grand narrative of the seven books, and, in most of them, marks the climax of the individual narratives as well. This paradigm

is a variation on the familiar “absolute good must defeat absolute evil” theme common in fantasy novels. Harry is constructed as the antithesis of Voldemort, and is bound to him in numerous ways: the lightning-bolt scar on his forehead is the most obvious, as are Harry’s ability to speak Parseltongue and his wand, which is an exact counterpart of Voldemort’s. Voldemort establishes the connection further by drawing some of Harry’s blood to complete the spell that remakes his body (*Goblet of Fire* 556–57). Finally, Dumbledore reveals to Harry that, because of a prophecy made shortly before Harry’s birth, Voldemort attacked him and, in trying to kill him, gave him powers that equalled his own, thereby ensuring that “neither can live . . . while the other survives” (*Order of the Phoenix* 743–44). Like Frodo Baggins, Harry is the reluctant hero who must act as the instrument of absolute good, even at the risk of his own life, to defeat the instrument of absolute evil.

Harry’s status as a representative of the forces of good is complicated by the second, far more inventive, complex, and fruitful paradigm that Rowling employs. While Voldemort’s agenda is revealed from book 2 on, Voldemort is almost literally a shadow, a disembodied vestige of his former self, almost entirely out of metonymy (“You-Know-Who,” “He Who Must Not be Named”) and memory. Although he is finally embodied in *Goblet of Fire* and demonstrates the extent of his evil in the cold-blooded murders that open and close that novel (17–19; 552–53), he vanishes again for most of book 5, and becomes again reinscribed, in metonymy and memory as before, but also in rumours about his present activities. Some members of the Order of the Phoenix make an effort to use Voldemort’s name, as does Hermione. As Dumbledore teaches Harry early on, “fear of a name increases fear of a thing itself” (*Philosopher’s Stone* 216). Harry’s status as hero, seemingly established in his encounters with Voldemort, becomes problematic as Harry grows into a world of increasing moral complexity and uncertainty; a world so highly regulated and defined by the strictness of its laws that it always seems in danger of collapsing under the weight of its own rules. When Harry first encounters the wizarding world in *Philosopher’s Stone*, he finds that he is celebrated—even revered—as “the Boy Who Lived.” He is the only person to survive the deadly Avada Kedavra Curse and the cause of Voldemort’s defeat, all at the tender age of sixteen months.<sup>3</sup> From *Chamber of Secrets* on, however, Harry finds himself more and more alienated from the wizarding world, both because he finds his own reputation, marked on his body in his famous lightning-bolt scar, a source of irritation, and because, in *Order of the Phoenix*, he is represented in the wizard press as a satirical figure, a Gilderoy Lockhart protégé obsessed with his own celebrity:

“Well, they’re writing about you as though you’re this deluded, attention-seeking person who thinks he’s a great tragic hero or something,” said Hermione. . . . “They keep slipping in snide comments about you. If some far-fetched story appears, they say something like, ‘a tale worthy of Harry Potter’, and if anyone has a funny accident or something, it’s ‘Let’s hope he hasn’t got a scar on his forehead or we’ll be asked to worship him next’ —” (*Order of the Phoenix* 71)

Hermione rightly explains this as a campaign of disinformation sponsored by the Ministry of Magic, to discredit Harry’s story of Voldemort’s return. However, the fact that the wizard press is so easily controlled by the Ministry allows Rowling to blend Harry’s personal story with a wider critique of systems of authority that define the wizarding world and to raise issues of political justice within a society defined by such rigid authoritarianism.

Harry’s battle with Lord Voldemort and the consequential heroic status he endures are thus set within a social and political context that repeatedly reveals the limitations of the very structures—education, law, government, and science—that enable the wizard world to function. *Order of the Phoenix*, in particular, develops the themes of power and its abuse, as seen in the control of information, the use of punishment, and the discrepancy between official truth and perceived reality. Harry’s greater enemies than Voldemort are those who seek to use their authority to block him from acting justly or in revealing the truth: Cornelius Fudge and Dolores Umbridge appear as Ministry of Magic villains, but even adversaries such as Snape and Draco Malfoy (who was responsible for his own disinformation campaign in *Goblet of Fire*) fall into this category as well. Within the wizarding world, therefore, Harry must appear as a radical, since his defeat of Voldemort must depend in some way upon his first transcending the obstacles of regulation, hierarchy, and social order established by, and embodied in, authoritarian structures.

My reading of the Harry Potter novels suggests that Rowling is drawing on literary models other than the children’s fantasy novels the books resemble. Although themes of power and control appear in other fantasy fiction, I believe that Rowling’s specific depiction of these themes locates her novels within genres separate from children’s fantasy, and problematizes her delineation of Harry’s status as hero. Rowling’s shift away from fantasy helps frame some of the Harry Potter criticism. John Pennington, for example, derides the books for not being “fantastic” enough, citing Ursula K. LeGuin’s “From Elfland to Poughkeepsie” as a model for fantasy literature (“Poughkeepsie,” in LeGuin’s argument, standing for the mundane world from which fantasy is supposed to remove the reader.) Pennington contends that Rowling “does not have a

firm footing in fantasy; her Potter creations are never certain about fantasy content, structure, theme, and how these components are essential to the reader's response to the fantastic" (82–83). He is, however, willing to concede that "[m]aybe Harry is supposed to be grounded in Poughkeepsie. Maybe the Harry Potter books are doing something other than aligning themselves with those so-called 'high fantasy' worlds defined by Tolkien, Lewis, and LeGuin" (85). Pennington is right, of course: Rowling is pursuing different matters than Tolkien, Lewis, or LeGuin; her books have the veneer of fantasy, but she clearly uses it as a way to bring the reader out of the landscape of contemporary Britain, which is often represented in postmodern literature by an unsettling literary landscape of fragmentation, irony, and self-referentiality. She is taking it back to a set of paradigms familiar, at least in literature, through which she can explore issues of social and political justice.

At the same time, Rowling wants her readers to be aware that Harry Potter is a child of the 1980s and 1990s. Karin Westman has noted the connections between the Potter books and political and social events in contemporary Britain. Westman reads the Potter books, particularly *Goblet of Fire*, as an allegory of the legacy of Thatcherite Britain (in which Voldemort stands for Thatcher), as reflected in the Conservative government of John Major and the present New Labour of Tony Blair (305–28). *Order of the Phoenix* seems to carry on this theme by showing the rise of a grassroots resistance group against Lord Voldemort's reconsolidation of power and the Ministry of Magic's crackdown on dissent, as represented by the self-appointed elevation of Dolores Umbridge from Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher to High Inquisitor, and eventually, Headmistress. In the disinformation campaign against Harry, Rowling even seems to anticipate the cooperation of CNN with the U.S. government in the Iraq War. Although wizarding culture is thoroughly removed from its Muggle counterpart, Rowling seems often to have one eye on newspapers other than the *Daily Prophet*.

Westman's article is, in part, a response to critics who read the Potter novels as "a throwback to some other culturally stable time"—usually Edwardian Britain—ignoring that the contemporary detail of the novel "indicates a world patterned on the tensions of Britain as it enters the new millennium" (327). The novels' concern with corrupt authority and the abuse of the individual's body and mind in the name of discipline, their questions over the rights of disenfranchised workers, and even their critical treatment of magic as a "science" are all contemporary concerns. Yet, thematically and structurally, the novels *do* look backward, not to Edwardian Britain, but even earlier, to the Enlightenment, and, espe-

cially, to the eighteenth-century *fin-de-siecle* concern over the place of social and political justice within the context of a burgeoning industrial economy. The novels bring contemporary issues of justice, technology, and political systems to their eighteenth-century roots. Rowling's literary heritage, therefore, includes not only children's fantasy and the school stories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also the Jacobin fiction of the 1790s and its descendants, particularly the fiction of William Godwin and Mary Shelley.

While it is true, as Westman admirably demonstrates, that contemporary social and political issues intrude into the fantasy wizarding world, it is also true that the Potter novels look back in their consideration of issues of political justice and the question of how individual ethical choices can be located in a secular world view that promotes power over the natural world as its primary defining characteristic. But why look back? Part of the answer, I think, lies in Rowling's construction of the wizarding world. It mimics the social and political structure of contemporary Britain, but with one significant difference: it does not have the deceptive appearance of progress and improvement that is provided by what Jean Baudrillard has called "the glare of technology" (*Transparency of Evil* 44). The first two films have admirably presented the wizarding world as a sharp contrast to the antiseptic world of Privet Drive. Diagon Alley, in particular, strikingly resembles an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century commercial street. Rowling removes the technological complications of the contemporary world not out of nostalgia for cultural stability, but to reveal that, without the veneer of technology, the world wrestles with the same social and political questions in the 1990s as it did in the 1790s. Rowling returns to the ideals of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution to re-examine issues of social and political justice, which she clearly believes have not been solved, and may have been complicated by, technological developments of the twentieth century. In place of the false positivism offered by technological progress, Rowling offers a kind of positivism that is built on the ideals of the English Jacobins: on what was believed by some to be the dawn of a new millennium, the final rout of the evils caused by the *ancien regime* and endorsed by the structures of oppression and authority, appeared to be underway. The Harry Potter novels offer a similar vision at the dawn of the present millennium.

### *Jacobin Ideals Resonate in Harry Potter*

Jacobinism in England was never a single, unified code of thought, except as it upheld many of the ideals of the French Revolution and

sought a way to adapt those ideals into English society. Like Rowling's own Order of the Phoenix, Jacobin societies, the London Corresponding Society, met in secret and worked to expose the government's participation in the evils of their day. Central to the Jacobins' agenda was political reform, essential in an era that saw political suffrage extended to less than twenty percent of the adult population, and social relief for the poor. This issue that, as E. P. Thompson has chronicled in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1968), paved the way for the labor movements of the early nineteenth century. One emblem of the radicals was the Liberty Tree, a code name for radical ideology which, when planted in the soil of English minds, would grow like an organic being. The Liberty Tree also stood as an image of the life-giving properties of Jacobin principles, a far cry from the life-taking principles embodied by the King, the Law, and the Church.

One of the central trunks supporting the Liberty Tree was William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, first published in 1793, but extensively revised in 1798. *Political Justice* is a critique of Edmund Burke's belief in the basic goodness of political and social institutions. Godwin's premise is that all government is primarily founded on inequality, and that true justice is impossible as long as social inequalities exist within societies. He champions the use of reason in a radical way; he directs it away from its application in modern science as a tool for establishing class, order, and hierarchy, and toward its use as a guide to moral behavior. In its more speculative sections, *Political Justice* is a blueprint for anarchy; that is, a projection of a future in which all people are ruled by individual reason, fed by social equality and personal liberty, rather than repressed and ordered by external forces.

Many of the principles outlined in *Political Justice* resonate through the Potter books. As noted in the opening quotation, Godwin saw the school as a site of inequality and injustice, which Rowling reproduces as well. The modern idea of the school, such as Hogwarts, is, as Michel Foucault asserts in *Discipline and Punish* (1979), founded on the use of reason to maintain class structure and social order, champion science as a discourse that imposed those same hierarchies on the natural world, and reinforce the authority of centralized power. Foucault notes the relationship between the academic term "discipline" and the more general progress of the individual's becoming subject to the wider control of the state (136ff.). Foucault suggests that academic disciplines comprise "the political anatomy of detail" (139), which are certainly demonstrated at Hogwarts. In this respect, Hogwarts resembles a technical training academy; the subjects offered are primarily pragmatic, either involving

practical experience with the basic tools of magic (Potions, Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures) or with the manipulation of natural phenomena through wands and language (Charms, Transfiguration, Defense Against the Dark Arts). Few traditional subjects are taught at Hogwarts; those that are have been transformed to fit the wizarding context. History, for example, has become History of Magic; mathematics has become the highly specialized Arithmancy; even newer disciplines, such as Sociology, are transformed into such subjects as Muggle Studies.<sup>4</sup> Magic at Hogwarts has become anatomized into a science, with specialty branches, theories, and technical training.

It is not surprising, then, to find Foucault's model of discipline as political control over the objectified (and scientifically anatomized) individual body operating at Hogwarts. Everything about Hogwarts suggests that individual students are subject to varying degrees of control. The quasi-military trappings of the individual houses (each with their own insignia, secret quarters, passwords, Quidditch teams, and ghosts as resident mascots) maintain a paradigm of division and control that mirrors the conscious efforts of post-Enlightenment classrooms to transform individuals into what Foucault calls "docile bodies." The limitations of this paradigm to defend against evil are revealed after Voldemort's return. The song of the Sorting Hat, traditionally the instrument of division and classification, is transformed in book 5 to a vain plea for inter-house cooperation and unity, which runs counter to everything the Houses stand for.

From this ordered and disciplined world two principles emerge. First, magic exists in its post-Enlightenment incarnation as an applied science, with a quantifiable body of knowledge that can be measured and tested in standardized ways (the OWLs and NEWTs). In effect, there is nothing especially magical, in the poetic sense of that term, about Rowling's magic, except perhaps that one must be born with some ability to perform it.<sup>5</sup> The second principle that emerges is that the rigid discipline required to master the applied science of magic also underlines the wizarding world in general. Rowling's novels are characterized by images of confinement and control, which the wizarding world attempts to explain as necessary for it to remain hidden from Muggles. Harry, accustomed to the equally repressive Dursleys, emerges as a force that attempts to break through the excessive regulation to determine the truth. His education, more than his academic studies, will consist of learning that regulation does not equal justice. Rowling's school story, while it may evince echoes of nineteenth-century school narratives, is not the world of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* or, as Anthony Holden has sniffily written, "Billy Bunter on broomsticks" ("Why Harry Potter").



Harry is aided in his radicalism by Hogwarts' most Godwinian character, Albus Dumbledore. Dumbledore is the embodiment of reason, used in the service of individual growth and happiness, at least as far as Harry is concerned. He is careful to point out to Harry that his free choice of the values of Gryffindor House over those of Slytherin mark him as a "true Gryffindor" (*Chamber of Secrets* 245). At the end of *Goblet of Fire*, he reminds Hogwarts' students that they will have the opportunity to choose between doing what is right and what is easy, and hopes that they will choose right (628). Dumbledore's sound belief in the ability of his students to discern for themselves the most just actions marks him as a true Godwinian: he does not regulate justice; he assumes it.

At the same time, Dumbledore's principles transcend regulation and conformity. He believes that when a rule or a tradition comes into conflict with a higher principle, it must be declared as faulty. While he protects Harry, he also turns a blind eye to his rule-breaking, not only out of his affection for the boy, but out of a sincere belief that Harry is guided by reason, loyalty, and a commitment to justice. Dumbledore notes in *Chamber of Secrets* that "a certain disregard for rules" was among those qualities Salazar Slytherin prized in his students (245), but he also underlines that Harry's choice to be placed in Gryffindor marked him as "very *different*" (245; the italics are Rowling's) from Tom Riddle/Voldemort. In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Dumbledore provides the means for Harry and Hermione to break the Ministry of Magic's laws by releasing two individuals unjustly condemned by those laws. Rowling is careful to note that Dumbledore does not subvert the idea of due process itself—he is, after all, a member of the Wizengamot, or wizard court—but rather, he subverts the corruptions and prejudices that render due process useless.

Dumbledore is also guilty of making what Rita Skeeter calls "controversial staff appointments" (*Goblet of Fire* 380). He does not seem to care that Hagrid is half giant, Lupin a werewolf, Firenze, Sybil Trelawney's replacement in book 5, a centaur, and Mad-Eye Moody largely discredited as "jinx-happy" and paranoid. Cornelius Fudge outlines this at the end of *Goblet of Fire* (615). Dumbledore adheres to the principle of rule by reason, as he demonstrates at the end of *Chamber of Secrets* when he is prepared to rescind his warning of expulsion to Harry and Ron for breaking school rules, given that the breaking of the rule resulted in the saving of Hogwarts (243). Furthermore, Dumbledore ignores the distinctions of bloodline in his selection of Hogwarts students, as Hagrid explains: "He'll accept anyone at Hogwarts, s' long as they've got the talent. Knows people can turn out OK even if their families weren' . . . well . . . all tha' respectable. But some don' understand that" (*Goblet of*

*Fire* 395–96). While it may appear that Dumbledore is allowed free reign at Hogwarts out of respect or fear, both in *Chamber of Secrets* and *Order of the Phoenix* he is relieved of his headship and publicly mocked and disgraced. Dumbledore's trials only reinforce Rowling's point, which is summed up in Godwin's principle: "[g]overnment was intended to suppress injustice, but it offers new occasions and temptations for the commission of it" (*Political Justice* I, xxiv).

If the Liberty Tree was a fitting emblem of Jacobinism, then its counterpart at Hogwarts might be the more terrifying Whomping Willow. It is first mentioned in *Chamber of Secrets* (59–60), where it functions as a horrific, if perhaps deserved, punishment for Harry and Ron's theft of the bewitched Ford Anglia. Its "twisted limb[s]" "knuckle-like twigs" and "branch[es] as thick as a battering ram" (60) mark this not as an image of growth and life, but as a weapon and a violent dispenser of punishment and destruction. In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, the full significance of the Willow itself is revealed: it is a guardian, an authority figure planted over a secret passage that leads to the wizarding village, Hogsmeade. Yet, the Whomping Willow also acts as a figure of protection, both for Remus Lupin, whose werewolf secret is kept as long as the Willow is in place, and for Dumbledore, who knowingly allowed Lupin the chance at Hogwarts.

As a figure of punishment, the Whomping Willow raises yet another Godwinian connection. One of the most striking aspects of the Potter novels is their depiction of crime and punishment, an issue central to Godwin's remarks on justice. In the Potter novels, the law is almost always abused, and the punitive extension of that law, the wizard prison Azkaban, is universally reviled. The first mention of Azkaban occurs in the context of Hagrid's false arrest on the charge of re-opening the Chamber of Secrets. Harry learns later that Hagrid previously had been framed by Voldemort's younger self, Tom Riddle; he is also aware that he has been sentenced without trial, and that his immediate removal to Azkaban, done more to preserve the reputation of the Minister of Magic than either as a punitive measure or a deterrent, is a direct violation of his civil rights. Hagrid, in effect, becomes a political prisoner, punished for the sake of the state—or, as Cornelius Fudge puts it, because the Minister has "[g]ot to be seen to be doing something" (193)—rather than for the common civil good. Similarly, Sirius Black and others are sentenced without trial (*Goblet of Fire* 456–57), in part because of Barty Crouch's aggressive commitment to rooting out Death Eaters. When Harry witnesses the show trials of the Death Eaters as part of Dumbledore's memories (*Goblet of Fire* 508–18), and when he later watches Fudge

“refus[e] . . . to accept the prospect of disruption in his comfortable and ordered world” (613) after Voldemort’s return, he realizes that the law has little commitment to impartiality or to true justice. The travesty of his own disciplinary hearing (*Order of the Phoenix* 126–38) only reinforces this realization.

Not until book 3 is the true significance of Azkaban delineated. The prison is guarded by Rowling’s most horrific creation, the Dementors, the foul creatures who drain happiness from individuals. The Dementors underline the Godwinian connection between virtue and happiness: the punishment for crimes in Azkaban is the loss of individual freedom, as in Muggle prisons, and the additional punishment of having happy memories, and a sense of joy or delight, drained by the Dementors. Rowling says that the Dementors “create an absence of feeling, which is [her] experience of depression.” (Interview). But because these creatures are used to guard prisoners as a consequence of relinquishing moral good, the prisoners are also forced never to be happy again. Rowling does not construct Azkaban as a place of reform; it is like prisons of the eighteenth century, a holding tank for vice, with no distinction made between petty offenses and more serious crimes. Rowling’s attitude toward this prison may best be summed up by noting that the prison guards are actually servants of Voldemort, employed by the Ministry after Voldemort’s downfall. Again, Godwin argues against the idea of punishment as a corrective against vice; he suggests that law could be eradicated by an encouragement of reason as the regulation for one’s actions (*Political Justice* II, 319–421).

### *A Magic World with the Intermediation of Technology*

Reading the Harry Potter novels in terms of Godwin’s theories helps to highlight the political dimension of the books and offers useful alternative critical paradigms to those of fantasy and children’s literature that have dominated study of the Potter novels. At the same time, Rowling’s conception of magic as a science can also be understood by turning to Godwin, and connections between science and justice in his writing. Rowling uses magic as a substitute for modern science to draw a closer connection between science and nature, and to reveal moral limitations of science. The rich, imaginative details of the wizarding world prove, as Roni Natov has argued, that “[i]n the Harry Potter books, magic calls attention to the awe and wonder of ordinary life” (315). They also call attention to the magic of ordinary life by circumventing the discourse of technology, which at the beginning of the twenty-first century has

overwhelmed scientific discourse in popular culture. While technology has fragmented the natural body to the point that manipulation of nature, even communication between humans, cannot take place unmediated by it, Rowling's conception of magic reinscribes control over nature in language (use of charms and spells) and in combination of natural objects (substances used to make potions). The Potter novels offer an alternate world where manipulation and control over nature do not depend on the intermediation of technology, and on the creation of the artificial. Instead, it relies on a "natural magic" that when properly mastered, grants users profound control over their environment. The body reclaims its own ability, unmediated by technology, to exert influence over nature, which technology has taken away from it.

As Baudrillard has pointed out, the transformation of nature at the end of the twentieth century happened, not through the technological recreation of the natural world, but by the introduction of a cyber world, in which the relationship between subject and object is now mediated by a screen, and by the abolition of the space between them:

Reading a screenful of information is quite a different thing from *looking*. It is a digital form of exploration in which the eye moves along an endless broken line . . . The whole paradigm of the sensory has changed. The tactility here is not the organic sense of touch: it implies merely an epidermal contiguity of eye and image, the collapse of the aesthetic distance involved in looking. We no longer have the spectator's distance from the stage—all theatrical conventions are gone (54–55).

Baudrillard's critique of artificial intelligence and virtual reality is useful here, because it invokes the baroque sensibility of the artificial as self-conscious art object, deriding cyber-technology for removing the tactility of experience. Rowling reinstates this tactility in the wizard's magic, but is careful to represent it as a natural, not supernatural, science. This is why Roger Highfield's attempt, in *The Science of Harry Potter* (2002), to "explain" the magic of Hogwarts in scientific terms misses the point entirely: it makes no difference if fiber optics can produce an Invisibility Cloak, or if virtual reality can create the experience of a Quidditch game. What matters is that things work in the wizarding world without technology, and a technological approximation of this world cannot legitimize its magic.

Rowling is not interested in critiquing technology itself; rather, she wishes to bring scientific discourse back to its Enlightenment roots, to explore the connection between science and ethics. She does not, as George M. O'Hare believes, "provide an alternative reality where magic retains its hold on the world" (863), by which he means "magic" as a

discourse that retains a spiritual conception of the world. Rowling's magic is completely devoid of any spiritual aspect. Although Harry initially believes that magic offers a solution to life's hardships, the great irony of the Potter novels is that his first wizard friendship is with Ron Weasley, a boy from a pureblood wizard family that struggles with poverty.<sup>6</sup> Excited by the prospect of keeping his oppressive relatives in line, Harry is dismayed to learn that he is not allowed to practice magic outside of Hogwarts or in front of Muggles; such actions result in severe penalties. Harry, and readers, begin to develop a broader perspective that reveals magic's essential limitation: magic, like science, has no ability to help Harry, or anyone, in making moral choices. Rowling's point is to use elements of fantasy literature to draw the reader into a parallel world where human nature remains the same, and where the means by which the physical world can be manipulated offers little help to understanding or altering human nature.<sup>7</sup>

### *Frankenstein, Harry Potter, and the Limits of Science*

Rowling's delineation of the limits of magic parallels Mary Shelley's indictment of science in what is probably the most famous piece of Godwinian literature, *Frankenstein* (1818). Shelley, William Godwin's daughter, draws directly on *Political Justice* in forming the political theme of her novel. *Frankenstein* marks the point where science begins to locate the focal point of reality onto the human body, and considers the effect of modern technology on the natural body. Frankenstein's Creature is not quite an android; he is a purely biological creation. Yet, the artificiality of his body marks the beginning of an irrevocable trend to locating artifice in technology, and of a move away from artificiality as a sign of the triumph of culture over nature, such as in the Baroque.

Like Rowling, Shelley uses an impenetrable science as her chief concern: the effects of science on human justice. Frankenstein's methods are vaguely described, and never explained; they appear to be a combination of alchemy and modern chemistry and physics.<sup>8</sup> The creation of the Creature occupies just a few pages of the novel.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the Creature's narrative of his miserable existence occupies most of what comprised volume 2 in the original 1818 text (128–178, Broadview ed; chapters XIV–XVII in the one-volume 1831 edition), framed by his repeated assertions that his misery would be relieved by just and fair treatment. He charges Frankenstein to carry them out, as he believes it is Frankenstein's duty. Frankenstein's failure to do so unleashes the Creature's spree of murders in volume 3. The connection

between justice and virtue is clearly made; Shelley emphasizes that only through Frankenstein's science can the Creature be granted justice, although Frankenstein argues that it was the same science that unleashed the misery in the first place.

*Frankenstein* offers numerous indictments of society's codified rejection of disenfranchised outsiders, a theme in the Potter novels. The Creature repeatedly complains to his creator that part of his misery is because he is *sui generis*, and therefore, alone. He has no place in the human world because it is unclear that he even *is* human. This problem finds its counterpart in Hermione's discovery of the wretchedness of house-elves. Her concern for the rights of these enslaved and traditionally despised creatures leads her to organize a fledgling lobby group, the Society for the Protection of Elvish Welfare, whose acronym satirically spells SPEW. Despite this joke (which Ron plays to death in book 4), Hermione is serious. Her platform is that house-elves are exploited labor, and deserve, in effect, a trade union that would guarantee them decent wages, fixed working hours, holidays, and, most important, freedom from servitude. Although her arguments resemble those of many contemporary trade unions, SPEW itself serves as a reminder that, as E. P. Thompson has argued, the most lasting effect of Jacobinism in Britain was the introduction of organized labor and the creation of a working-class consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

Marilyn Butler noted Frankenstein's Creature embodies the growth of working-class movements that seemed capable of overthrowing the middle-class masters, yet did not in part because of lack of organization or infiltration by government spies. Steven Forry has shown that *Frankenstein*, in its nineteenth-century stage incarnations, was sometimes read as an allegory of the effects of the industrial revolution. In book 5, Hermione tries to argue on behalf of the vile house-elf, Kreacher, who has served Sirius Black's family for years, but who, unlike the "good elf" Dobby, has unquestioningly adopted the Black family's racism and Dark Wizard tendencies. Although abusive to his master, insulting to Hermione, and committed to thwarting house cleaning operation, Hermione suggests to Black, "If you could just set him free, then maybe—" (103).

Maybe what? The house-elf's name supplies the clue to the completion of Hermione's thoughts: "Kreacher" echoes the name of Frankenstein's unnamed Creature, who, like the house-elf, is ugly, malevolent, and reviled by humanity. Yet, he intreats his creator, with an argument straight out of *Political Justice*, "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous"

(Shelley 126). Hermione believes that if the lives of house-elves were improved even hardened malcontents like Kreacher could be redeemed. Linking Kreacher with Frankenstein's Creature not only expands the Potter-Godwinian associations, it points to analyzing how Rowling depicts magic, as a particular kind of science.

In her consideration of science and justice, Shelley critiques her father's groundbreaking radical work in its understanding of the place of science in politics. Godwin was unquestioningly enthusiastic about how science could take part in his ideal society. For Shelley, reading her father's work twenty-five years later allowed her to read it somewhat skeptically. By 1818, the radical tradition, as embodied by Godwin and Thomas Paine, had largely failed to effect change in working class conditions. In fact, by 1818, the working class had begun to organize along principles that applied the 1790s radicals' theories in profoundly different ways. More importantly, Shelley perceived that Godwin's assertion that "the value of truth will be . . . illustrated if we . . . enquire into its effects . . . abstractedly, under which form it bears the appellation of science and knowledge" (*Political Justice* I, 307–8) was of little value if scientists were not willing to use science to promote human justice. This penetrating insight squares off against Godwin's naively optimistic view that truth and knowledge, being self-evident virtues, will eventually be adopted by humanity as the only rational choice. If science is to be the means by which this great transformation will occur, Shelley reveals how science has not only failed in its duty, but has even assisted in increasing human misery.

Ultimately, *Frankenstein* is a novel about the disappointment of the promise of revolutionary principles to remake the world. Frankenstein's Creature becomes a monster not, as Hollywood has told us, because of his defective brain. Rather, to use anachronistic terminology, the problem is one of software, not hardware: specifically, the paradigm of science encoded in Frankenstein. Science without social responsibility is mad science. For Shelley, science that commodifies its body of knowledge to the point where the fact of possession—what we might understand as "intellectual property"—impedes the scientist's primary responsibility to improve humanity, is mad science. Frankenstein, on the other hand, attempts to control nature without any sense of his wider social responsibilities. By the novel's end he has learned nothing from his experience, and still prefers to see his Creature as an external malevolent force, a project gone wrong, without seeing his own part in the outcome.

*Frankenstein* is not an anti-science book. Rather, it is a novel that characterizes the dominant paradigm of the modern world as scientific

and explores the implications of imposing that paradigm. Similarly, the Potter novels use magical science not to lead children away from science, as Dr. Ivar Ekeland feared in a *National Post* article (Sokoloff A2), but to underline that when the dominant discourse of any society is power, control, and an ignorance of justice, neither science nor magic can do anything to prevent evil from penetrating and ultimately overwhelming it.

The Harry Potter series, and its metanarrative, are as yet unfinished. We do not know how Rowling will play out the ideas she has carefully introduced over the course of the novels published so far; Rowling herself offers few hints, except in the form of teasers such as “Keep your eye on Snape” and “Why do you assume Harry will survive book 7?” Most important for my purposes, it remains to be seen whether Rowling will create a Godwinian space for her characters to enact their final conflict: Frankenstein’s Creature ultimately gains his revenge over his morally bankrupt creator, but immediately departs Walton’s ship to presumed suicide, since, as he declares to his dead enemy, “Blasted as thou wert, my agony was still superior to thine; for the bitter sting of remorse may not cease to rankle in my wounds until death shall close them for ever” (244). The narrative ends on a note of moral ambiguity, not on a triumph that good has somehow ultimately defeated evil. Whether the Potter novels will end on the same ambiguous note, or whether Rowling can still opt for a paradigm of moral absolutes, in spite of the ambiguities she has already introduced, should be, more than plot spoilers, sufficient reason to await publication of the final two installments.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> These novels are: book 1: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, book 2: *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, book 3: *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, book 4: *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, book 5: *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. The novels will be referred to by book number or short title. Page references are to the British editions.



<sup>2</sup> *Chamber of Secrets* introduces readers to the theme of racism in its designation of “Pureblood” and Mudblood” wizards; *Goblet of Fire* carries the idea of segregation among intelligent creatures further, with Hermione’s growing concern at the treatment of house-elves.

<sup>3</sup> The chronology is implied but fairly easy to work out: Harry was born July 31, 1980; Voldemort attacked the Potters’ house and was defeated on Halloween night the following year. The narrative proper of book 1 begins in June, 1991, on Dudley’s eleventh birthday. The entire chronology of the novels is available at Steve Vander Ark’s Harry Potter Lexicon (<http://www.hp-lexicon.org/timeline.html>).

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that subjects such as literature, languages, music, painting, and drama are virtually non-existent at Hogwarts: the cultural life of Rowling’s wizarding world gets very little mention, since she is primarily interested in magical training and its relationship to the wider political world. The majority of Hogwarts graduates seem destined for careers in the Ministry of Magic; at least, this is seen as the most desirable of career paths to follow. Fred and George Weasley shock their mother by deciding not to continue their education in favor of becoming businessmen.

<sup>5</sup> In her interview with Stephen Fry at the Royal Albert Hall on June 26, 2003, Rowling declared that she did not believe in magic. She qualified this statement by making the admittedly “corny” declaration that she believed in other forms of magic, such as love and the imagination.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander R. Wang, a twelve-year-old reader of the Potter novels, has posed a series of questions headed “Inconsistencies within the Books.” Question 6 asks, “Why would decent quality wizards live in poverty? Couldn’t they perform basic magic to gain material goods?” Question 7, a corollary, asks, “Wouldn’t it be a simple spell for Ron to make his old robes new looking? Wouldn’t this be pretty easy magic for his parents?” (Heilman 283). I think the easiest answer to these questions is that Rowling wants to highlight that magic neither eliminates social and economic inequalities, nor does it allow wizards and witches to move beyond their social station. Mr. Weasley is poor because he prefers to work at a low-paying job he enjoys rather than abandoning his principles to work his way up the ministry ladder. It is precisely this kind of limitation on magic that takes the initial glow off the wizarding world for Harry.

<sup>7</sup> One exception to this might be legilimency, which allows the user some insight into another’s thoughts and emotions. However, as Harry’s experience with Snape demonstrates, legilimency and its blocking counterpart, occlumency, are both notoriously difficult arts to master, and are practiced by only very advanced wizards.

<sup>8</sup> Alchemy makes only a very brief appearance in Rowling's work, in the figures of the Philosopher's Stone and its creator, the alchemist Nicholas Flamel. Rowling seems to have little time for magic that depends on the profoundly arcane, as is demonstrated in her satirical treatment of divination. Some critics, such as John Granger, have seen extensive alchemical symbolism in the Potter novels; some members of the "Harry Potter for Grown-Ups" discussion list see the seven novels as representing the seven stages by which one becomes an alchemical adept. While I cannot here assess the validity of these claims, I do think it worth noting that alchemy was seriously studied until the early eighteenth century; even scientists such as Sir Isaac Newton found it interesting.

<sup>9</sup> The focus on the creation itself is a product of the stage tradition of *Frankenstein*, which was enshrined in the 1931 film version and has been retained in all film versions, even those that claim a great deal of fidelity to the original novel.

<sup>10</sup> See especially *Making of the English Working Class*, 781–915, although the premise of the entire book is to draw a connection between the Jacobinism of the 1790s and the working-class consciousness that Thompson argues emerged in the 1820s and 1830s.

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