Books and cleverness, friendship and bravery: Harry Potter and the deconstruction of traditional representations of gender

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Gender is an important aspect of children’s literature, as it provides a point of reference for readers to understand how their own gender is developed, and the cultural forces that dictate what gender looks like. However, typical representations of gender in children’s literature is often stereotypical, and presents rigid notions of how boys and girls, men and women, are supposed to act, speak, or feel, within themselves and towards each other. The Harry Potter series as children’s literature uses these stereotypes to represent fluid notions of gender, providing a hero that is sometimes not typically heroic, and a female protagonist that at times is stronger and braver than her male counterpart. A postmodern view of gender is that an individual does not have to be typecast as masculine or feminine, brave or cowardly, strong or weak; instead, as this analysis of the Harry Potter series shows, characters blend ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ traits in a way that subverts the typical ideals of male and female characters, to ultimately engender new ways of thinking about how to be masculine or feminine. This analysis will draw upon a post-structuralist, feminist viewpoint, using such theoretical work as R.W. Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity, Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstruction, Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence, the idea of the grotesque female body and its link to subversive humour, and Margery Hourihan’s analysis and reimagining of the heroic quest narrative.