Since 2005, publishers of children’s literature have begun to release a large number of graphic novels aimed at young readers. Many of these comics take place within the fantasy genre and feature female protagonists; a surprising trend given the normal assumption that boys do not want to read stories about girls, and the usual publishing strategy of courting male readers specifically.

This project examines five such fantasy comics, Kazu Kibushi’s *Amulet*, Ben Hatke’s *Zita the Spacegirl*, Barry Deutsch’s *Hereville*, Jane Yolen and Mike Cavallaro’s *Foiled*, and Ursula Vernon’s *Digger*, which feature young heroines in their leading roles. Drawing on the scholarship of postfeminism (Gill, McRobbie, Tasker and Negra) and Perry Nodelman’s work on children's literature, I use textual analysis to reveal a set of problematic implications in the comics. Despite the positive framing of the protagonists as active participants in their narratives, these comics end up falling into familiar stereotypes and problems. Taken as a whole, they all promote a particular brand of tomboyish femininity in their protagonists, which becomes the de facto model of femininity to the reader given the general lack of other significant female characters. They furthermore have a tendency to avoid raising issues of gender, an elision which nevertheless coexists with casts of characters which are majority male, as well as settings which tend to distribute roles along traditional gender lines. The end result is a naturalization and personalization of structural inequalities in society.
There is considerable potential in this combination of comics and children’s literature, both for the fostering of literacy among young readers, and for promoting cross-gender identification. From a feminist standpoint, however, that potential is squandered through an unwillingness to go further. Nevertheless, this is just one small section of a larger publishing trend which bears further investigation.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. THE PROBLEM OF AGENCY</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. GENDER AND CHARACTERIZATION</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. GENDERED ASSUMPTIONS IN THE GAPS</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

There has been an explosion of comics released by the children’s publishing industry in recent years. Seen as a way to boost flagging literacy numbers by providing a bridge between picture books and adolescent novels, these comics have swelled the graphic novel sections of libraries. They were perhaps inspired by the success of Jeff Smith’s seminal *Bone*, a fantasy comic published by Scholastic to great critical and commercial success. While told from the perspective of the eponymous protagonist, *Bone* was more about the girl Thorn and her quest to restore her kingdom. Perhaps taking their cue from Thorn, several fantasy comic series starring active female characters have begun since *Bone* concluded and continue to release installments. These children’s comics have yet to garner much scholarly attention, either from feminist scholars for their female protagonists, or from scholars of the comics form or children’s literature genre. This project seeks to address that gap, and in the process I will address some critical questions: How do these comics reflect dominant cultural discourse on gender roles? Do these heroines serve to counteract stereotypes and express new subject positions for girls? And to what extent are they fully realized characters?

What makes this sudden surge in heroine-driven children’s comics so remarkable is the way it flaunts the conventional wisdom of the children’s publishing industry. Publishers have long grappled with the tendency for girls to read in much larger numbers than boys. Owing to patriarchal assumptions about the universality of the male experience, this has traditionally resulted in a strategy of pushing boy protagonists in children’s literature. The assumption is that boys are unable or unwilling to relate to female protagonists, while both girls and boys can relate to male protagonists, so the industry has long courted boy readers through male heroes with the

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understanding that girls would continue reading regardless. Beyond simply predisposing the
genre towards male heroes, this strategy has involved initializing the names of female authors,
such as J.K. Rowling and K.A. Applegate, as well as hiding the occasional female protagonist
behind abstract covers and androgynous names. Which is what makes the move to push female
protagonists in comics so surprising: it is much more difficult to downplay the presence of a
female protagonist in a visual medium than a verbal one, and these comics make no attempt to do
so. Furthermore, comics itself is a medium generally associated with male readers, which makes
the presence of so many heroines in these texts even more curious. Determining the reasoning
behind this strategy is beyond the scope of this project, but its novelty nonetheless plays a role in
marking these texts as worthy of attention.

In order to maintain a manageable scope for this project, I limited myself to comics in the
fantasy genre and published recently. All of these comics have been, and most are still being,
published serially. I selected Kazu Kibuishi’s *Amulet*, Barry Deutsch’s *Hereville*, and Jane Yolen
and Mike Cavallaro’s *Foiled* based on the recommendations of librarians and teachers, and
added Ben Hatke’s *Zita the Spacegirl* and Ursula Vernon’s *Digger* based on the critical acclaim
those two texts have received. With the exception of *Digger*, which began in 2005 and concluded
in 2011, all of these series have begun since 2008 and are still ongoing as of the writing of this
thesis. Gauging the intended audience of these texts is difficult, owing to different standards
between publishers and library associations, as well as the personal discretion of individual
actors in deciding where to shelve and when to recommend them. From the publisher’s side,
these texts are generally recommended for “middle grade,”\(^2\) or “middle-school,”\(^3\) readers, with
recommended ages generally falling in the 8-12 range (sometimes referred to as the “tween”
demographic). *Digger* is once again included as an exceptional example: It was published first

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\(^2\) First Second, “The First Second Collection.”
\(^3\) Abrams, “Book Details: Hereville.”
online as a webcomic and then later by Sofawolf Press, a small publisher specializing in stories featuring anthropomorphic animals as characters. Neither Vernon nor Sofawolf offer any indication of the intended audience; however, in reviews it is frequently discussed in the context of other children’s comics, such as Bone, and a WorldCat search indicates that it is often shelved in the “teen,” “YA,” or “juvenile” graphic novel sections of public libraries. Based on this, I am confident that it resides within the field of children’s literature and fits within the scope of this project.

My methodology consists primarily of textual analysis and close reading of both visual and verbal elements from the texts and looking at how the visual and verbal are related. Children’s literature and fantasy both have a marked tendency towards straightforward narratives which seek to limit the potential for subversive reading. As such, my analysis pays particular attention to the gaps in the text; what is left unsaid or disavowed. It is through unstated assumptions that much of the potentially naturalizing effect of these texts on perceptions of gender may be accomplished. The critical framework I use to analyze these texts relies heavily on genre theory, feminist criticism surrounding the discourse of postfeminism, and the rhetoric of the comics medium.

**Literature Review**

For the purposes of this thesis, I am approaching these texts as belonging to the genre of children’s literature. This approach is in large part informed by the work of Perry Nodelman, a prominent scholar and author in children’s literature. I take many of my assumptions and ideas about how to apply critical theory to children’s literature from his book *The Hidden Adult*. First and foremost among these is the assumption that I cannot read these texts as a child would, and so I cannot know with certainty how a child would understand the elements of these texts that I identify as having hegemonic message. This is not to imply that there is an unbridgeable gulf
between myself and the eventual audience of these comics; it is worth quoting Nodelman on this point: “While I can’t describe how a ‘real child’ understands children’s literature—or even how real children do—I can certainly use my knowledge of reading and textual practices to attempt a description of how the literature works to affect its implied readers—the child readers constructed by its texts.”4 This approach has its advantages, for it focuses attention on how children’s literature constructs childhood through the lens of the adult gatekeepers who drive the genre. That is to say that children’s literature is by and large written by adult authors with a particular conception of what childhood is like, which is modified by the perceptions of publishers, which are ultimately tailored to appeal to the notions of the parents, teachers, and librarians who ultimately control children’s access to these texts. This adult-driven discourse shapes notions of what is appropriate for young readers, and determines which texts are labeled “juvenile,” which are labeled “young adult,” and which do not get published at all.

Central to the concept of children’s literature is the notion that certain knowledge needs to be withheld from children for their own protection. Issues of gender, conflated as they are with sexuality in common parlance, are frequently elided as a result. As Nodelman argues, “In children’s literature gender is at least theoretically divorced from sexuality, and boys must be boyish and girls girlish for reasons that have nothing to do with the underlying reasons that there are gender categories at all.”5 The naturalization of gender norms that this approach implies is my primary concern as I analyze these comics. Avoiding commentary on gender while simultaneously displaying gendered expectations discourages critical engagement with those expectations. In this instance, I agree with Roderick McGillis’s stance in his article, “Learning to Read, Reading to Learn,” that “rather than try to shield children from the world they live in, we

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5 Ibid., 176.
ought to be trying to give them the tools to read this world carefully and critically.”6 While the subject of gender may be avoided with the intention of not limiting kids’ potential, its absence also means failing to teach them to recognize how society has already sought to limit them.

The feminist framework which I am applying in this project is based upon the work analyzing postfeminism published by Rosalind Gill, Angela McRobbie, and Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra. In “Postfeminist Media Culture,” Gill defines postfeminism as “a sensibility that characterizes increasing numbers of films, television shows, advertisements, and other media products” through a particular set of themes or features.7 Much of the theory on postfeminism centers on analysis of television and film, especially those aimed at adult audiences and featuring adult women as protagonists. As such, this framework requires some modification when applied to children’s literature in light of the aforementioned tendency towards asexuality in the field: themes of sexual desire and the centering of feminine identity in the “sexy body”8 are not in evidence in these children’s comics. At the same time, postfeminist themes of individuality, personal choice, and self-surveillance are strongly present. Gill draws a connection between these themes and neoliberalism: “at the heart of both is...the contemporary injunction to render one’s life knowable and meaningful through a narrative of free choice and autonomy, however constrained one actually might be.”9 As such, the protagonists in question can be thought of as neoliberal subjects: they are constructed as powerful individuals possessing agency, referring here to the ability to make independent choices and impose their will on the world. Contradictorily, this discourse of total agency often exists in the context of female characters overwhelmingly choosing traditionally feminine roles and representations for themselves. The exercise of agency results, not in a plethora of different ways of being, but in a marked tendency

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7 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 148.
8 Ibid., 149.
9 Ibid, 154.
to embrace very similar versions of the same model. As McRobbie notes in “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” postfeminist texts “[give] rise to demarcated pathologies...which carefully define the parameters of what constitutes liveable lives for young women without the occasion of re-invented feminism.”\(^{10}\) This emphasis on agency unconstrained by society is often antagonistic to feminism, for as Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra argue in “In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies,” postfeminism “[assumes] the achievement and desirability of gender equality on the one hand while repeatedly associating such equality with loss on the other.”\(^{11}\) Indeed, these texts often promote a retreat from traditionally male spaces back to the domestic sphere, something each of these texts imply with their emphasis on returning “home” or returning to normalcy.

Amanda Lotz, in her book *Redesigning Women*, provides a counterpoint to theorists like Gill and McRobbie on the subject of postfeminism. She is skeptical of the “role-model” approach which quantitatively analyzes the personality traits and roles of female characters to show the limited range of women’s representations in the media.\(^{12}\) As she points out, this approach is lacking when it comes to predicting which characters women will find meaningful. While her concerns are valid with regards to primetime television, where both the producers and the audiences have objectives aside from finding strong, positive representations of women, there is something to be said for “role-model” analysis when it comes to children’s media. Nodelman asserts that children’s literature is often explicitly constructed to be educational and to provide positive role models and lessons for children.\(^{13}\) As such, there are certainly grounds for critically analyzing the representations of girls for girls. At the same time, both Lotz and Nodelman are keen to note that this approach assumes a passive audience that straightforwardly accepts the

\(^{10}\) McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” 262.
\(^{11}\) Tasker and Negra, “In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies,” 108.
\(^{12}\) Lotz, *Redesigning Women*, 11.
\(^{13}\) Nodelman, 157.
meanings presented to it, which is not universally true of either adults or children. Ultimately, Lotz is interested in using postfeminism to indicate a complex relationship with feminism, not a backlash against it as argued by McRobbie. What is significant about these middle-grade comics in relation to postfeminism, however, is their complete refusal to address feminism at all, antagonistically or not. This, then, constitutes the gap in feminist critique that I seek to address: how does postfeminism function in a context that seeks to avoid explicit reference to gender or sexuality, and what message does this impart to young readers?

My understanding of where these texts fit into the field of fantasy literature and how they compare to each other in those terms is informed by Farah Mendlesohn’s *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Mendlesohn classifies fantasy into subgenres, two of which, the portal-quest fantasy and the intrusion fantasy, are relevant to this project. Portal-quest fantasies involve a protagonist leaving familiar surroundings and passing through a portal—literal or metaphorical—to an unknown place where the fantastic exists. *Amulet, Zita the Spacegirl,* and *Digger* are all portal-quest fantasies, as the protagonists are taken from a familiar place to a fantastic and unfamiliar place. Though Digger technically doesn’t leave the world in which she lives, the area surrounding the village of Rath is so strange and fantastic compared to her home that she may as well be in another world. Intrusion fantasy, on the other hand, involves fantasy elements entering into what was previously understood as a normal world, often a setting which purports to be the real world. *Hereville* and *Foiled* both can be considered intrusion fantasies, as they both take place in seemingly mundane locations which, unbeknownst to most of their inhabitants, house fantastic creatures. Both types generally involve a naive protagonist, whose perspective the reader must depend upon to understand the fantastic.14 Furthermore, both genres rely heavily on guides whose information about the world and the fantastic is presented as absolute truth: The maps

14 Mendelsohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy,* 1; 148.
provided to the reader are always accurate, the historical information the protagonist uncovers is always factually accurate, and the reader is expected to mirror the protagonist in accepting what is presented to them.\footnote{Ibid., 14; 148.} Even Digger, who frequently questions the information presented to her by her guides, finds that it is all true despite her misgivings. As a result, the potential for subversive readings is limited, and the dominant reading, the one which justifies the protagonist’s quest, sits unchallenged by the text.

Finally, I am approaching these texts as belonging within the medium of comics, with the attention to visual as well as verbal elements which that implies. My understanding of how to approach comics as a medium is built upon Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* and Douglas Wolk’s *Reading Comics*. While both provide a useful overview of visual rhetoric in the comics medium, neither has anything to say about how comics function in the field of children’s media. To fill in these gaps, I turned to Nodelman’s *Words About Pictures*, a critical analysis of children’s picture books. While Nodelman makes no mention of comics, and McCloud stops short of explicitly acknowledging picture books, they both reach very similar conclusions about the ways in which pictures express meaning alongside words. This also establishes one of the major gaps this project seeks to fill: for whatever reason, neither comics scholars nor children’s literature scholars have taken it upon themselves to explore the space where their disciplines overlap. It may be that comics scholars are still too invested in distancing themselves from the traditional association of their medium with valueless children’s entertainment, while children’s literature scholars still see themselves as concerned with “literature,” and not the breadth of popular culture directed at young audiences; or it may be that this phenomenon is simply too new to have come to their attention. In either case, this is an area which is ripe for further research and analysis.
Chapter Outline

My chapter divisions are based on a step by step analysis of elements of postfeminism as they are expressed within these texts. Chapter One focuses on questions of agency: How are the heroines of these texts constructed as individuals able to express their will in the context of the plot? All are to varying degrees awarded active roles in driving their narratives, but their control over their fates is mitigated by different plot elements; this is sometimes used to frame an explicit discourse about the value of free will. In any event, for postfeminism’s construction of women and girls as neoliberal subjects to be credible, these characters have to demonstrate the ability to express and pursue their personal desires.

Chapter Two examines the subject positions of the prominent characters in each text. In it I seek to establish the extent to which these heroines fall under the feminist critique of postfeminism, which is that it privileges traditional expressions of femininity despite its emphasis on choosing freely from a variety of possibility. Rather than focus exclusively on the protagonists, I also analyze the supporting cast, male and female, in order to critique their ability to weaken gendered stereotypes by depicting multiple ways of being.

Finally, in Chapter Three I build upon my analysis in the first two chapters to get at the heart of the matter: the messages these texts are sending about gender. Whether they explicitly address it or not, these texts make statements about gender through the positioning of male and female characters and the distribution of roles between them. Indeed, the habit of avoiding the subject of gender entirely often only serves to naturalize the unstated assumptions embedded within these texts.

These comics, while generally positive when taken individually, exist as part of a problematic trend in media aimed at children and young adults. Particularly in the case of young girls, these texts all advance a particular model of behavior, which crowds out other potential
ways of being. And though the depiction of heroines capable of being active individuals succeeding in traditionally male-dominated roles can be inspiring, the refusal to address structural inequalities trivializes these accomplishments. By obscuring the difficulties involved in working against social expectations surrounding gender, these texts transform a social issue into a personal one, placing the full weight of success or failure on the individual’s choices.
CHAPTER I: THE PROBLEM OF AGENCY

An important issue to raise is the question of just how much agency the heroines of these comics possess, both in terms of controlling their own lives and in terms of driving the narrative. This is an important consideration, because postfeminist discourse requires women to perceive themselves as free-acting agents. In the process, cultural and political influences on women can be downplayed or ignored, and women are held responsible for failing to meet cultural standards. Before these heroines can be analyzed to determine their implications for feminism and postfeminism, one must first determine the extent to which they embody the neoliberal ideal of a free-willed individual. Each heroine is placed in a unique set of circumstances, and uses their response to these circumstances to characterize them either as actively charting their course through the narrative, or passively allowing the narrative to carry them along.

Certainly, genre is an important consideration here; both portal fantasies and intrusion fantasies tend to involve protagonists who are drawn into conflict by outside forces. This might involve the protagonist being in the wrong place at the wrong time, being selected (or targeted) by supernatural forces outside his or her perception, or making a choice without full knowledge of the implications. Once drawn into the fantasy world, the protagonist may or may not have the option of returning immediately to normalcy, though the text generally requires that they stay regardless of whether it is the result of choice or compulsion. Furthermore, fate, destiny, and prophecy are frequently utilized tropes in fantasy, which may have the effect of closing off options for the protagonists. Like the protagonist’s continuing presence in the fantasy world, this depends heavily on how the individual text handles the tropes. On the one hand, a protagonist’s destiny may be vague or poorly defined, serving only to underscore their importance to the story. On the other hand, a prophecy may outline an unavoidable set of circumstances that requires the protagonist to take certain actions with no choice in the matter. Furthermore, prophecy can be
ambiguous as to whether it predetermines a character’s choices or simply predicts the choices a character is going to make, though in either case this introduces a degree of ambiguity with regards to free will. Finally, fantasy narratives open up a wider set of techniques whereby one character can manipulate another into taking a specific action, with or without directly impacting the exercise of free will. This can range from magical illusions that deceive a character with regards to who is present and what is happening, to direct mind control that makes a character obey the will of another.

Of the characters under consideration, *Amulet’s* protagonist’s agency is the most undermined and inhibited. The narrative’s action is launched due to Emily’s decision to stick her hand into a device and then put on the stone hidden inside, but since she has no reason to anticipate the series of events that would follow that decision, she cannot be said to bear responsibility for that. This action leads to a kidnap attempt on Emily which instead results in her mother, Karen, being kidnapped and taken to Alledia, with Emily forced to pursue in order to rescue her. Crucially, once Karen is rescued, Emily is left without a clear motivation for remaining in Alledia. Theoretically, she should be able to take her family back to the real world and safety, but she does not, and she is unable to articulate a reason why. She repeatedly implies that she is somehow compelled to stay by forces external to her, saying that “even if I tried to leave, I think something would stop me.”\(^{16}\) When Karen tries a second time to convince Emily that they should go home, Emily allows everyone to believe that the amulet prevents her from leaving. In a subsequent dream sequence, the amulet rejects this idea, asking her: “why did you lie to them Emily?...You told them I was forcing you to stay. But it was your choice” (3:79). The amulet is not necessarily telling the full truth here, as it is certainly the case that Emily is not able to remove it, but Emily does not contradict the amulet when it tells her that she can leave at any

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time. Even if Emily is externally compelled to continue her quest, it is a strange direction for the text to take, considering how much emphasis it places on the importance of Emily’s choices.

There is a strong diegetic emphasis placed on Emily’s choices. Emily is frequently asked to make choices with momentous consequences by those around her, and her ability to choose “freely” is often emphasized. These choices are almost always offered to her by male mentors and advisors seeking to shape her towards their own ends. Silas Charnon presents Emily with the choice to accept or deny the amulet’s power, but spends quite a bit of time telling her how powerful the stone is and how “it will give [her] everything [she] desire[s], and much more” (1:100). Not only that, but his words of reassurance to other characters present strongly imply that he fully expects Emily to accept the amulet and is not even entertaining the idea that she might choose otherwise. Later, the character Leon offers to help Emily learn to control the amulet’s powers and help her mother, but on the condition that she commit to “her role as a stonekeeper” (2:97). Leon castigates Silas for choosing not to pass down the amulet to his descendants before Emily, and when Emily asserts his right to choose to allow his children to live a normal life, saying “not everybody wants to be a hero,” he quickly responds, “but they should” (2:95). Leon paradoxically tries to reinforce the importance of Emily’s agency while simultaneously implying that she has no real choice in the matter:

LEON:     You must believe that you are here by choice, and not by circumstance.
EMILY:    But what if that’s not true?
LEON:     You must make it true. (2:98. Emphasis mine)

In other words, Leon wants her to believe that she is autonomously pursuing her desires while simultaneously following a role laid out for her by prophecy. He does not, however, provide her with a good reason to believe that her own will matters in the face of prophecy. Contrast this
with a similar exchange between Harry and Dumbledore from *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*:

“But, sir,” said Harry...”it all comes to the same thing, doesn’t it? I’ve got to try and kill him, or —”

“Got to?” said Dumbledore. “Of course you’ve got to! But not because of the prophecy! Because you, yourself, will never rest until you’ve tried! We both know it! Imagine, please, just for a moment that you had never heard that prophecy! How would you feel about Voldemort now? Think!”

…”I’d want him finished,” said Harry quietly. “And I’d want to do it.”

“Of course you would!” cred Dumbledore. “You see, the prophecy does not mean you *have* to do anything!...In other words, you are free to choose your way, quite free to turn your back on the prophecy!”

Dumbledore gives Harry a logical argument, a compelling rationale, that convinces him that he is able to freely choose his course despite the presence of a prophecy which seems certain to be fulfilled, and so preserves Harry’s understanding of himself as a free agent. Granted, Rowling is working in a medium that gives her room to be more verbose than Kibuishi, and Dumbledore has the advantage of knowing his protege intimately, whereas Leon has known Emily for less than twenty-four hours. Nevertheless, it is striking how Leon does not attempt to give any justification for why Emily could consider herself free to act instead of a pawn of prophecy.

To further undermine Emily’s agency, her biggest choices are often presented to her with an element of emotional blackmail attached. When Silas presents her with the choice to accept or turn away the amulet’s powers, he does so while surrounding her with sentient robots who will “die” without the power of the amulet to sustain them; robots who are visibly mourning his

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imminent demise. It is no wonder that Silas is confident that Emily will choose to accept the amulet’s questionable power with so much pushing her in that direction. Likewise, Leon frames her choice to fulfill the messiah role laid out for her in prophecy by emphasizing the consequences if she refuses: “You must understand that if we do not stop the Elf King, your mother will not be the only one to die. If we fail, we will all perish.” And yet he expects her to believe that she is fighting the Elf King out of her own free will and not because of circumstances. The amulet makes similar moves to intimidate Emily with the consequences of her actions, asking her, “how can you afford to rely on faith when time is running out?” in order to convince her to fully accept its power, and convincing her of the necessity of opposing the Elf King by intimating that Earth will be destroyed if she chooses otherwise.

Similarly, the character Max, while masquerading as a helper, deceives Emily into furthering his own ends. He then offers her a choice with her family’s life hanging in the balance, which is explicitly framed as a test to see if Emily can “turn off [her] emotions...to make the best possible decisions under the greatest pressure” (4:181). Once again, despite all of the influences weighing on her ability to choose, the choice is presented as a “free” one, or at least it would be if Emily had the “iron will” Max is looking for. As should be clear at this point, Amulet is full of masculine figures, good and bad, who insist that Emily is a freely choosing agent even as they manipulate her towards the choice they want her to make. This is where the text’s emphasis on Emily as a free agent begins to undo itself and question whether Emily has any agency at all.

Given the way in which Emily’s agency is undermined by the very people who insist that she is making the choices herself, it should come as no surprise that Emily begins to reject the notion that she is in control of her own destiny. She denies her agency explicitly, as when she questions Leon’s notion that she is in Alledia by choice and supports the idea that the amulet

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18 Kibuishi, Amulet, 2:93.
forces her to stay, as well as implicitly, when she allows Silas, Leon, and Max to determine the path she takes. This is not to say that she never makes her own choices while being pushed towards a particular option—she consistently overrules anyone who tries to tell her to kill or abandon Trellis, despite the fact that he attempted to hurt her and that she herself is slow to trust him—but her lack of an explicit motivation beyond fate for her quest and the continual manipulation of her choices by those around her pushes her to see herself as someone being driven by forces outside of her control. At the end of book four, when Vigo, yet another male mentor figure, asks her if she is ready for the responsibility of saving the world, she places such a question firmly outside the realm of her own agency: “The difference between [a previous stonekeeper] and me is that she felt she had a choice...don’t ask me if I’m ready. Because no matter what happens, I’ll have to be” (4:205–6). Emily feels she has no choice in the matter, has no option to turn down her responsibility. This is as close to articulating a true reason for her actions that Emily voices, and it is implied that this is a result of her, as the amulet puts it, “awaken[ing] to become the person this world needs you to be” (4:190). Significantly, she raises this issue of readiness again when making her first decision as a leader of Cielis, overruling Vigo’s advice not to commit their forces against the Elf King in the process:

EMILY: We need to show them that the Guardian Council has returned.

VIGO: But you’ve seen the state of things here. We are not ready.

EMILY: We’ll never be ready. And if we choose to wait, we’ll miss our chance to make a difference. (5:72)

This is a significant step for Emily, as it is her first clear decision as a leader of people, as opposed to being a pawn which is moved about by others as she is for the majority of the series, but it still comes with a tinge of inevitability. Emily decides to act not because now is the best time to act, but because there will never be a good time to act, so it might as well be now.
Visual aspects of the comic serve to further cloud the question of how much agency Emily is exerting by implying that her behavior is limited by the amulet’s influence over her. Leon explains to Emily that “The more powerful the amulet becomes, the more difficult it will be to control” (2:111), and that if she fails it will take control of her mind and body and likely begin a destructive rampage (4:122). When Emily first examines the amulet closely, even before she discovers its power or sentience, her eyes take on a red color instead of their usual black, and they glow red again when she examines the amulet after first putting it on (1:32–33). Periodically throughout the first volume, her eyes glow red when the amulet speaks to her and when she uses its power to kill a bird threatening her brother (1:62; 1:71). Navin expresses distrust of the amulet’s motives and exhorts Emily not to accept the amulet’s powers, but she, with eyes glowing red, chooses to take its offer (1:108–9). As the amulet shifts from being a helper to a metaphorical demon on Emily’s shoulder which seeks to dominate her, the red glowing eyes start to become associated with Emily making excessive use of the amulet’s power (2:66–67). Notably, when Emily explicitly rejects the amulet’s influence, her eyes are free of this characteristic glow (2:69; 2:110), despite the fact that the amulet itself is still glowing, demonstrating that the color in her eyes is not merely a reflection of the amulet’s light, but a possible indication of its influence over her actions. Furthermore, when Emily is in the city of Cielis, which has old magic that silences the voice of her amulet, her eyes only glow twice, and one of those occasions is when she is remembering the amulet’s words. The combined effect is to blur the line between Emily and the amulet’s persona such that it becomes impossible to determine in any given instance where Emily’s agency begins and the amulet’s influence ends. This is further emphasized in the character of Luger, who abruptly changes from a fascistic strong-arm enforcer to a doddering old man when his stone is destroyed and its influence ended. The revelation that the voice in Emily’s stone has been speaking to virtually every stonekeeper
and manipulating them to some unknown end further calls into question the extent to which these characters have been free agents within the narrative.

A significant contributing factor to the opacity of Emily’s motives is the exclusion of certain stylistic elements from the text. Unlike, *Digger, Hereville, and Foiled*, there is no narration and there are no thought bubbles in *Amulet*. *Zita the Spacegirl* also does without those elements but represents Zita’s inner world through highly expressive facial expressions, whereas Emily is much more stoic. The result is that the reader is never given a clear picture of what Emily is thinking. The only clues are what she says to other characters, and since she is reluctant to explain her motives to those around her, and on at least one occasion deliberately misleads them, the reader is likewise left in the dark. Even in her dream sequences, she is contending with the voice that speaks through her amulet, who is trying to control her actions and who she does not trust. Since it is impossible to confidently determine why Emily makes the choices she does, it is very difficult to evaluate whether she is doing something because she wants to do it, or because she feels she has no choice but to do it.

A useful contrast to the way *Amulet* calls its protagonist’s agency into question is the way *Digger* handles matters of prophecy and destiny. Looking at a high level plot summary, one might think that Digger is the subject of some great overriding destiny due to the way coincidences pile up. She is brought to the village of Rath by a mysterious magical force, and is told a bit of hyena myth shortly before discovering that one of the players in that myth, a god called He-Is, is being kept alive against his will in the very hole that brought her to Rath. Furthermore, that god was secured in place at his request by a direct blood ancestor of Digger, a wombat named Helix. It looks as though Digger is present in the story to fulfill a role laid out for her by fate, much like Emily. The difference is in the way these individual elements are dealt with as they arise. When Digger asks the Statue “Why here? Why now? Why me? I mean, what
are the odds that a wombat just *happens* to stumble over a bit of hyena myth and then winds up in a Temple of Ganesh?” the Statue explains:

The Earth is so old, and home to so many strange things, that there is hardly an inch of ground that was never home to a shrine, or a god, or a battle, or some magical oddity. Even under the ground, you yourself have said, there are old gods, old prophecies, old lost things. It is not odd that this bound god should be here, in this place. If anything, it is odd that we are not constantly hip-deep in such magical echoes of the past. (350)

Thus, Digger’s involvement in these coincidences is not a sign that she is not in control of her own destiny, but rather just a consequence of the fact that there are strange things everywhere waiting for someone to stumble across them. Likewise, when Digger meets the ghost of Descending Helix of Fernfossil Clan, the wombat who helped secure He-Is, and questions the odds that she, as one of his descendents, just happened to be involved in the same work he was, Helix flatly responds: “I had eight sons. A thousand years ago. You do the math” (679). Helix further elaborates: “You’re not a chosen descendent or anything. Most of your warren probably has Fernfossil blood somewhere” (681). In order words, it did not specifically have to be Digger who got involved in the conflict; the odds were pretty decent that any wombat who happened to stumble into Rath would be a descendant of Helix.

Just as important as the text’s efforts to disarm any implications of coincidence on Digger’s agency is her own actions and insistence on free will. Though she had no say in the matter of coming to Rath in the first place, having hit a patch of “bad air” underground and then been used to create a magical gateway, and though she would have immediately set off for home if she knew the way back, she quickly reasserts her agency in choosing how she spends her time stranded in Rath. First, she chooses to look for a way home by consulting the librarians at the

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19 Vernon, *Digger*, 348. Citations for this source are taken from the online version of the text, and page numbers correspond to those listed in the URLs for individual pages, which are not consistently ordered.
Temple of Ganesh. Then, when that does not pan out, she chooses to make herself useful in the nearby village, helping them during a bandit raid and digging ditches and root cellars. More significantly to the narrative, when given a choice between taking a ride home and assisting Murai in a dangerous expedition, she chooses to help Murai, not because anyone asks her to, but because she believes it is the right thing to do (484; 501). Furthermore, Digger is highly invested in her own agency and highly distrustful of prophecy, to the point that she tells off an oracular slug that tries to tell her something: “Nobody tells me what to do, and they especially don’t tell me what I’m doing before I’m doing it!” (506). Unlike Emily, who frequently questions her agency, Digger loudly declares it and is allowed to exercise it, albeit within certain bounds.

Another point of departure between *Amulet* and *Digger* is in the impact of mentors and assistants on the protagonists’ agency. Like the protagonists of most portal fantasies, Emily and Digger find themselves in a strange world that functions on a set of laws and customs which are foreign to them. As a result, they need the assistance of guides in order to explain the world and how it functions, which also provides an opportunity to explain the world to the reader. Otherwise, the protagonist would have little idea of what is possible or what strange consequences may result from their actions. For Emily, this creates a sense of helplessness: Because she does not understand the political or cultural landscape of Alledia, she relies on her assistants not just to explain what is going on, but also to tell her what she should be doing next. This is especially noticeable in volumes two through four, as Emily’s movements and goals are defined by Leon, Max, and Vigo in succession. Conversely, Digger’s helpers make it a point not to tell her what she should be doing. The Statue is very deliberate in not asking Digger to help Murai and tells her to go home instead (484). On occasions where the Statue does ask something of Digger, it does so politely and with explicit trust in Digger’s judgment, allowing her to set stipulations and conditions (198). Similarly, while Murai is an expert in “comparative
mythology” and is quite useful as an advisor to Digger (222), she allows Digger to lead the expedition even though it is ostensibly Murai’s destiny they are seeking, and Grim Eyes specifically states that “my orders are to try to keep her in one piece, not talk her out of whatever she’s supposed to be doing” (704). In fact, the only supporting character who tells Digger what she should be doing is Ed, and he only does so once, on an occasion where Digger already knows what she should be doing and just needs to be told to stop grumbling and do it (524). In short, none of the supporting characters in Digger ever try to hijack the narrative out from under the protagonist, and so her agency remains uncompromised.

The other texts under consideration do not place the same diegetic emphasis on the importance of free will for their protagonists as Digger and Amulet, but, existing as they do within the discourse of postfeminism, it is important to consider the way they portray their protagonists’ agency. Zita is perhaps the youngest heroine among those presented in these texts, but she is also one of the most active in terms of driving the narrative. Like Emily, Zita kicks off the main conflict of the text by playing with something she does not fully understand. Crucially, when this inadvertently opens a portal, she is not the one pulled through; instead, her friend Joseph, who did not want her to play with the strange device in the first place, is kidnapped through the portal. This means that, unlike every other heroine examined here, Zita chooses to leave her world behind, and does so at the culmination of a wordless sequence that, through facial expressions first worried and then determined, conveys a sense that she feels her responsibility for Joseph’s predicament and chooses to put herself at risk to rectify things.20 This is further supported by her shamefaced, low-voiced response to One’s characterization of her as “nobly plunging through the portal,” with “it wasn’t like that, One” (79). She takes responsibility for the consequences of her action and will not allow others to construe things another way. Zita

20 Hatke, Zita the Spacegirl, 11–12.
also displays her agency in the way she interacts with the other characters in the text. Most of her allies are characters she chooses to help out of predicaments, despite indications that doing so might not be a good idea. One does not seem entirely trustworthy at first, and Randy seems more like a jittery liability than a helper, but Zita chooses to help them anyway. And when the portal to take Joseph and Zita home begins to destabilize such that it cannot take them both, Zita lets go of Joseph’s hand to let him be sucked through the portal, choosing to send him home and find another way back herself (181–82).

In a portal fantasy, the protagonist is usually immersed in the new fantasy world and completely caught up in the conflicts which engulf it. Emily spends all her time travelling, fighting, or training; the text places full emphasis on the conflict with the Elf King and the Voice and leaves little time for Emily to engage in more normal activities. Similarly, Zita is racing to rescue Joseph before he is sacrificed or the world they are on is destroyed by an asteroid. Even Digger, who at least gets some room to breathe in between her escapades, finds little opportunity to indulge in whatever hobbies or habits she would have practiced at home. In contrast, the conventional elements of intrusion fantasy at play in *Hereville* and *Foiled* have important implications when considering the agency of the heroines of those texts. While Mirka and Aliera are drawn into dramatic, supernatural events, they still exist fully in a quotidian world which is recognizably similar to our own. This means that while they are involved in either driving or reacting to the important conflicts of the text, they must still interact with, and make choices with regards to, their everyday lives. They have to attend school, they have homework, they have family obligations, and they have to interact with characters that have nothing to do with the primary conflict of the text, but who may still represent personal obstacles. Thus, it becomes possible, indeed necessary, to distinguish between their agency with regards to driving the text and their agency with regards to controlling their own lives.
In terms of her everyday life, Aliera is clearly in control and able to pursue her goals without interference. Her decision to pursue fencing is clearly an expression of her will; her parents were initially lukewarm about her desire to pursue the sport, suggesting that she was under no parental pressure to continue. That, combined with the considerable investment of time and effort necessary to pursue the sport, somewhere in the neighborhood of multiple hours a day, six days a week, strongly indicates that Aliera fences out of a strong personal drive. She does it because she wants to, not because she is compelled by her parents or coasting along for lack of anything better to do. Granted, Chris’s statement that being a skilled fencer is “usual for a Defender”21 could be taken as an indication that Aliera’s hidden destiny played a role in pushing her towards the sport, but this is not given much weight by the text. For one, Chris says “usual,” not “necessary” or “inevitable.” For another, this is part of a sequence wherein Chris is clearly trying to undermine Aliera’s resolve and force her off her game, making anything he says somewhat suspect. Finally, Aliera pays no attention to that throwaway line whatsoever, instead choosing to focus on other aspects of what he is saying. Aliera clearly sees no reason to question her agency with regards to being a fencer.

Apart from her fencing, Aliera’s agency with regards to her everyday life is preserved by her ability to maintain a desirable independence in school, as opposed to an imposed ostracized status. The text strongly implies that she does not belong to any of her high school’s cliques because she does not want to be defined by a group identity and does not care to make the effort to fit in. When Aliera characterizes her “loner” status in school as being similar to James Bond, she betrays a certain enjoyment of her position.22 Likewise, the text suggests that she could join up with a clique if she so desired; the only thing stopping her from being a prep is her clear contempt for that group, and while she asserts that her grades aren’t high enough to join up with

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21 Yolen and Cavallaro, Curses! Foiled Again, 134.
22 Yolen and Cavallaro, Foiled, 30.
the nerds, the text indicates otherwise. An excerpt from the school paper seems to indicate that she maintains a 4.0 grade. Furthermore, when she has a test day in school, while she is not particularly confident in her English test, she “aces” her math test, turns in her Civics paper a day early, and gets a perfect ten on her lab report. All of which suggests that the real reason she is not part of the nerd clique has less to do with her grades and more to do with her inclinations. Aliera is forced into close proximity with Avery due to being assigned as his lab partner and does have difficulty resisting his charms (magical or otherwise) in those circumstances, but outside of class she is able to keep her guard up and maintain a frosty distance despite her feelings. Thus, in most aspects of Aliera’s everyday life, she is able to exert agency and maintain a lifestyle that suits her.

The revelation that Aliera is the Defender of the Seelie Court, on the other hand, seriously complicates the construction of her as a free agent. Aliera comes by this position due to lineage, not by choice; she is the Defender because her grandmother was Defender, and for no other reason. Even the process by which the Defender’s Sword came into her possession was orchestrated by outside forces. Nor does she have the choice of renouncing her position. When she tries to say she does not deserve the position, the Faerie Queen overrules her, saying that she will, which can alternately be taken as a statement of faith in Aliera’s character or a prediction that Aliera will be deserving regardless of what she thinks or does. Either way, Aliera recognizes that she has no choice in the matter, and makes no further attempts to deny her position, despite her clear ambivalence about having to battle evil trolls on behalf of the Seelie Court. This is not to say that Aliera’s choices cease to matter once she discovers her position, she still makes the pivotal decision to trust Avery which allows her to succeed, but from the moment she discovers

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23 Ibid., 28.
24 Ibid., 46.
27 Ibid., 147.
she is the Defender her agency is compromised, and this seeps over into her everyday life. Aside from having her life thrown into disarray, Aliera is curtly informed that she will get married and have two daughters, presumably so that the title of Defender can be passed on. Whether this is a prediction or an order, it is delivered with a finality that brooks no contradiction; Aliera will get married, she will have daughters, and she seems to have no say in the matter, except perhaps in her choice of husband.

Mirka’s situation in *Hereville* is, in many ways, a mirror image of Aliera’s. Whereas Aliera is nominally in control of her life prior to the discovery of her destiny, Mirka’s agency in everyday matters is constricted. Living as she does in an Orthodox Jewish community, her choices of pursuits and activities are limited by religious custom. Unlike Aliera, who fences because she wants to, Mirka knits because she is forced to, and the best she can do to get out of it is to argue with Fruma, her stepmother, to waste time. Likewise, Mirka has to contend with dress codes, the separation of the sexes, and the potential impact of her actions on her family’s reputation in the community. On the other hand, Mirka has considerable agency with regards to the strange, fairy tale creatures she begins to encounter around the community. In fact, her discovery of the witch’s house and her earning of the witch’s favor both stem from incidents in which she choose to stand up to bullies in defiance of her assigned role, theoretically implying that she is being rewarded for exercising her agency by being granted additional agency. She desires to be a dragonslayer, unlike the other protagonists discussed, who all show a marked reluctance to take a leading role. Ironically, Mirka is also the only protagonist to be in a narrative that lacks any apparent need for a hero. Her dream of being a dragonslayer was born before she

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30 Ibid., 11–12; 67–71.
was even aware that magic and monsters truly exist, and chasing this dream rewards her agency beyond what she is able to exercise in her daily life.

Unfortunately, Mirka attaining agency with regards to Hereville’s supernatural side does not similarly empower her to deal with her normal problems. If anything, it makes things worse for her, as her choices with regards to the supernatural have a negative impact on her everyday life; earning the enmity of the talking pig through stealing a grape leads to her being terrorized and becoming the object of gossip and ridicule in the community, and her decision to try and win a sword from the troll earns her an extended period of being grounded. Arguably, the bulk of the conflict in both volumes of *Hereville* is caused by Mirka’s choices. The aforementioned grape-stealing incident leads directly to her finding out about the troll and his sword from the witch. Chasing after the sword requires her to bully her younger brother to prevent him from telling their parents. By the same token, the action of the second volume, *How Mirka Met a Meteorite*, is sparked by her ill-advised decision to let the troll cast a spell that sends a meteor hurtling towards the witch’s house. After the witch turns the meteorite into a copy of Mirka to stop it from destroying Hereville, Mirka’s choice to split her life with “Metty,” the meteor clone, results in her getting pushed out of her own life entirely. Her attempts to resolve this problem through a series of contests backfires on her when she chooses contests that Metty is better at. It is only some clever word-twisting by her siblings and some backup magic from the troll that allows her to prevail. At nearly every step of the narrative, Mirka makes things worse for herself by making the wrong decisions. If it were not for the ultimately positive effect of these choices on her outlook and attitude, one would think that she would be better off not having exercised her agency in the first place.

As can be seen from this chapter, agency takes on an important role in each text in the sense that each heroine is allowed, to varying degrees, to take an active role in driving the
narrative. Significantly, the text which affords the least agency to its protagonist, *Amulet*, does so as a way of highlighting the importance of free will. Emily’s restricted agency serves as an occasion to dissect the importance both of making choices and of the way choices are made, which does not arise in the texts that give their protagonists a freer hand. Thus, each text maintains its position in the discourse of postfeminism by making the heroine’s status (or lack thereof) as a neoliberal free agent one of considerable importance. What bears further analysis, however, is how that emphasis on free will relates to the expression of masculine or feminine traits within each text.
CHAPTER II: GENDER AND CHARACTERIZATION

Both feminist and postfeminist viewpoints are concerned with the portrayal of masculine and feminine traits. While feminist cultural theorists look for a variety of portrayals in order to render stereotypes “uninhabitable,” or nullified, as described by Amanda Lotz,\(^{31}\) postfeminist texts tend to emphasize using the agency assigned to female leads to choose traditionally feminine roles. On the one hand, the female protagonists in these graphic novels are too young to worry over the dilemma of trying to “have it all,” or having to choose between the public and private spheres. On the other hand, children’s media in general has invested considerable stock in socializing children into conventional gender roles. At the same time, the aforementioned agency and ability to actively drive the text that is awarded to these heroines is itself traditionally a masculine trait. A certain degree of slippage is therefore inevitable. This chapter is concerned with the display (or rejection) of traditional notions of gendered behavior in light of the necessary mixing of gendered traits. What bears close attention is the extent to which these texts either seek to contain this slippage of gendered traits, or embrace the possibilities of hybrid personalities, whether in the character of the protagonist or the supporting cast.

*Amulet* has a marked ambiguity with regards to characterizing Emily as masculine or feminine which mirrors the ambiguity in its approach to her agency. Emily’s activity in the text is driven by her use of the amulet; it is how she fights, how she overcomes obstacles in her path, and how she drives the narrative forward. This is not necessarily a way of containing her as a female protagonist—supernatural empowerment through magical talismans is a common convention of young adult fantasy texts, regardless of the protagonist’s gender—but the implementation in this case is worth noting. The amulet allows Emily to drive the narrative and participate in physical conflicts without engaging in conventionally masculine behaviors. Instead

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\(^{31}\) Lotz, 23.
of physically trading blows with opponents, Emily blasts them from a distance using telekinesis and protects herself with a telekinetic shield. Likewise, she can move heavy objects with the amulet rather than demonstrate an unfeminine level of physical strength. Indeed, on one of the rare occasions where she attempts physical activity without using the stone’s power, it is pointed out that she would be more effective using the stone, and she is admonished that she is “going to kill [herself].” Trying to succeed based on her own abilities is thus constructed as being counterproductive, if not outright dangerous.

In terms of personality, Emily’s most prominent trait is her stoicism; she does not express her emotions frequently, and her expressions are often understated. This air of calm has more to do with Emily’s fatalism than a masculine mastery of her emotions, which suggests that Emily is not masculine so much as she lacks femininity. This lack is characterized as counter to Emily’s personal happiness. The character Silas remarks to Emily that “there must have been a time in your life when you were happier. It’s difficult for me to imagine that you were always such a serious and determined young lady” (1:100, emphasis mine). By calling attention to Emily’s gender and implying that masculine traits like seriousness and determination are connected to Emily’s unhappiness in the same thought, the text suggests that Emily would be more content if she were conventionally feminine. This may, in part, explain the sense of fatalism which surrounds Emily’s status as an active character; she is an unwillingly active character because she would be happier being passive.

This problem in establishing Emily as female while discounting her masculine traits is further brought home through Emily’s motivations (or lack thereof) for engaging in the conflicts of the narrative. She is initially drawn into the world of Alledia through the motivation to keep her family together, and is further coded as feminine through the overprotective, maternal role

32 Kibuishi, *Amulet*, 2:120.
she takes on towards Navin in her mother’s absence (1:75). This leads to a narrative problem which feeds into Emily’s apparent unwillingness to take an active role as the text progresses: once her mother has been rescued and her family reunited, Emily has no femininely constructed motivation to continue her adventures. The text requires her to step out of her feminine role to continue being an active character, but is unwilling to provide her with a more masculine motivation to do so. As a result, the text underlines Emily’s femininity as a problem, because she cannot choose the “natural” course of action and cannot step far enough out of her assigned role to develop an alternative approach.

The text further undermines the value of femininity in its depiction of Karen, Emily’s mother and the only other major female character. Karen is both the distressed damsel of fantasy literature, a passive object to be rescued, and the inflexible adult of children’s literature, too rational and distanced from youthful innocence to be able to adapt to the strange circumstances she finds herself in. As a result, her attempts to reassert control of her family after her rescue only impedes Emily and Navin’s progress, and she is continually making missteps based on assumptions which do not apply in the world of Alledia. She distrusts Leon on the basis of him being a fox despite the loyalty he has already demonstrated (3:17); She tries to prevent Emily from taking the necessary step of going into a drinking hole to recruit an airship captain, though whether this is out of a lack of trust of Emily or a misplaced sense of propriety is unclear (3:32). Worse, she is shockingly insensitive when Misket and Cogsley, two of the sentient robots accompanying the family, are lost at sea, telling Navin that “this is like when you lost your toys. They’ll turn up again, eventually” (3:133). Whereas every other character treats the constructs as people, Karen fails to see them as anything other than objects. And while Emily’s reasons for continuing her quest are unclear, Karen does not seem to consider that they might be valid, as she tries to overrule Emily’s decision to remain in Alledia (3:63). This is not to say that Karen
only exists as an obstacle to Emily; on more than one occasion she provides valuable emotional support. All the same, it comes as no surprise when Karen is sent off somewhere safe at the beginning of volume five as Emily and Navin go off to war. By removing the only feminine supporting character, the text reinforces the notion that femininity has no place in relation to a military conflict.

Aside from Karen, all of the major supporting characters in *Amulet* are male. One purpose these characters serve is to take on the more masculine activities from which Emily refrains. Leon and Trellis engage in hand to hand combat, wielding swords and trading blows and parries with enemies, where Emily attacks from a distance. Similarly, Navin handles piloting, mechanical matters, and is the official general of the resistance forces. And while Vigo does defer to Emily, he nevertheless mediates her position as co-member of the Guardian Council, leaders of the city of Cielis. Thus, if the text requires a masculine action to be performed, it provides a male supporting character to perform it, preventing Emily from being unacceptably masculine.

The antagonists of *Amulet*, like the supporting characters, are almost exclusively male, and they all share a similar brand of masculinity in common. A common thread among antagonists is an emotionless, rational brand of decision making characterized by a willingness to sacrifice others for the “greater good.” This sentiment is expressed by Luger, Max, and the Elf King himself, and is used to justify atrocities such as killing one’s own family or bombarding a hospital with artillery. This vilification of masculine, utilitarian decision-making serves to justify Emily’s aforementioned unwillingness to exercise her agency; if this is the way she will be expected to make decisions, perhaps it is better not to choose. The text further problematizes masculinity through the character of Gabilan, whose extreme individualism bordering on sociopathy drives him to avoid any entangling associations; he has no loyalty to the Elf King’s
political mission, nor does he have any compunctions about harming his fellow elves in the course of completing his task, callously stating “I’m the only one of my kind there is” (3:73). The fact that the only character who can claim that he is an unconstrained free agent is a villain, and the fact that he is no more successful at stopping Emily and her allies than any other antagonist, further calls into question the value of masculine rationality to which Emily should theoretically aspire.

The combined effect of these gendered portrayals is to call into question the value of both masculinity and femininity. This uncertainty is anchored for masculinity through the supporting cast’s portrayal of a masculinity more focused on cooperative action and the protection of the innocent than on unconstrained individualism. Leon’s concern for bystanders, and Trellis and Navin’s easy willingness to work in tandem with Emily provide an array of positively coded portrayals for boys. Femininity, on the other hand, is left precariously adrift due to having its portrayal placed squarely on Emily’s shoulders. Her own uncertainty mirrors the text’s uncertainty with regards to casting femininity in a more active role, and requires female readers to look to male role models if they find her portrayal unsatisfying.

*Zita the Spacegirl* is similar to *Amulet* in terms of the gender distribution of the main cast of characters. Admittedly, a large portion of the main cast are either robots or non-humanoid aliens, which makes gender a bit more amorphous, but these characters are still gendered male through name, personality, or physicality. In addition, the universal male assumption is visibly in effect, as the occasional female alien’s gender will be indicated through feminine ornamentation. Such is the case with the little female Lumponian, who looks like nothing so much as a pink haystack with a face and pink bow,\(^{33}\) as opposed to the other Lumponians, who wear fezzes or nothing at all.\(^{34}\) Taking this into account, *Zita*, like *Amulet*, has a female protagonist supported

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\(^{33}\) Hatke, *Legends of Zita*, 146.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 188–89.
predominantly by males, with only one or two notable females being present aside from the heroine. This may be an attempt to court young male readers. As Tasker and Negra note, postfeminist texts “are directed at a female audience while covertly acknowledging male viewers.” The provision, or rather preservation, of a majority male cast can be read as an attempt to appeal to male readers with a variety of models despite the presence of a female protagonist.

The five male supporting characters in Zita occupy a range of masculine personalities. First among them is Piper, a roguish spacefarer who is first seen unsuccessfully attempting to pull a con on some gullible aliens. Piper vacillates between helping Zita and hindering her, his main personality trait being his selfishness. His main goal in the first book is to get off of Scriptorius before an oncoming asteroid destroys it. He initially helps Zita because she appears to provide a way off of the planet, but makes a deal behind her back and tries to convince her to abandon Joseph when a more convenient alternative arises. Eventually, he comes around and reveals a willingness to help Zita at risk to himself, establishing him clearly as an outlaw hero. Like many selfish heroes he is also a clever schemer and adept with gadgets and tricks. He frequently provides Zita with devices capable of allowing her to overcome obstacles, such as the “Hoppin-Stomps” and “Doorpaste.” While his cleverness sometimes gets him into trouble, it is invaluable in the second book; he is the first to realize that Zita has been replaced with an impersonator robot, though his decision not to tell the rest of the crew almost has drastic consequences when they figure it out on their own and react poorly. Additionally, it is only because he realizes in time that the Lumponians held back vital information about the space giant

36 Excluding Joseph and Glissando, neither of which have been fleshed out sufficiently for analysis.
37 Hatke, Zita the Spacegirl, 96.
38 Ibid., 129.
39 Hatke, Legends of Zita, 88.
that they are able to prevent the device from forcing Zita to pilot it until her death. So while his character has its flaws, those are smoothed over sufficiently that he can stand as a positive representation of clever masculinity.

In contrast to Piper’s clever selfishness, his shipmate, Mouse, is affectionate and selfless. From their very first meeting, Mouse offers his assistance to Zita with few compunctions and no apparent expectation of repayment. He rarely leaves her side, both providing himself as a steed and as a valuable source of moral support on her journey. In this way, Mouse serves a similar role to the character Strong Strong, in that he provides physical assistance to help Zita along her way without interfering with her ability to drive the narrative. Neither Mouse nor Strong Strong are much for words, so they are unable to participate much in planning around obstacles or directly furthering Zita’s character development, but they are still able to apply their unique capabilities when necessary. They are passive characters generally providing emotional support to Zita, which would characterize them as feminine if not for their physical aptitude.

The two robot characters, One and Randy, are polar opposites in terms of the gendered traits they display. One is a “Heavily Armored Mobile Battle Orb,” theoretically powerful, but discarded in favor of later models due to his being “programmed with honor and loyalty” (152). On the one hand, he is aggressive and even a bit sadistic, quick to deploy his weaponry, excited to see things harmed or destroyed, and eager for retribution against the robots who replaced him, marking him as thoroughly masculine. On the other hand, he is easily controlled by Zita, always putting his weapons away and holding back his destructive impulses when she tells him to, perhaps due to the aforementioned programmed traits. In a way, One comes off as a bit henpecked—fierce and powerful, but continuously under the thumb of a feminine personality. Contrasting against One is Randy, who at first appears to be a scrapyard castaway. His body

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40 Ibid., 174–75.
41 Hatke, *Zita the Spacegirl*, 68.
barely functions, he is anxious all the time, and he is utterly useless in a fight. These traits thoroughly feminize him, especially contrasted against One’s bellicose masculinity. Randy also shows a feminine degree of concern over One, noticing that his mainline fluid is leaking and warning him that if he keeps pushing himself he will shut down permanently (130). Even when it is revealed that Randy is in fact a superweapon, these gendered traits are reinforced; while One fights with a phallic machinegun that emerges from his lower midsection, Randy’s weapon is fully contained within his body and fires from his open chassis without emerging. Furthermore, Randy’s weapon-body underscores his femininity in the way it is activated: The weapon is not under his control, but rather is connected to his emotional state—when he gets angry it begins powering up on its own (114; 155). While this paradoxical combination of power without control marks Randy as feminine, it also positions him as a vitally important character, as he is the only one who can save the planet by destroying the oncoming asteroid. While the more feminine characters in the text may seem to play a less prominent role at first, each character becomes important in getting Zita to Joseph so she can rescue him.

As can be seen, Zita provides a variety of models of behavior in its male characters. Readers looking for points of identification in male characters can find intelligence, sensitivity, strength, aggressiveness, and power hidden within an unassuming form. For female characters, on the other hand, the only one to look towards aside from Zita is Madrigal. Madrigal’s character is most interestingly described in contrast to Piper, as they are the only adult humans in the text, and they bear some intriguing similarities and strong contrasts. Like Piper, Madrigal has some strange, unexplained powers (perhaps the result of sufficiently advanced technology) and a certain faculty with gadgets. While Piper relies almost exclusively on his gadgets to get out of difficult situations, though, Madrigal makes more use of swift feet and acrobatic jumps. She, like Piper, is the captain of her own ship, but she maintains a larger crew and scrapes by through
circus performances rather than Piper’s cons and empty showmanship. Unlike Piper, when Madrigal aids Zita it is absent of any implications of self-serving behavior; she is presented as having a genuine, selfless, concern for Zita’s well being, and puts herself at risk to help Zita escape from the Doom Squad. Thus, Madrigal represents a melding of masculine skills and approaches to conflict with feminine attachment and concern for others.

Zita herself shows a similar mix of masculine ability and feminine attachment. The basic plot outline of the first volume, a protagonist gathering allies whose special skills help them rescue a distressed individual, is one strongly associated with male heroes in fairy tale and the hero’s journey, but it is given a feminine inflection through Zita’s personal attachments and emotional expressiveness. The text relies heavily on Zita’s ability to communicate her inner world through her facial expressions. After running off into the forest, her wide eyes and bitten lower lip show her fear and guilt over the role she played in Joseph’s kidnapping (12). Her lowered eyebrows and firm grimace on the next page show her determination to help him (13). Throughout the text she similarly wears her thoughts on her face, marking her as an emotional being and a strong contrast to Emily’s stoicism. On the other hand, between taking down the mechanized predators in the Rusted Wastes and disarming the Screed, she is responsible for defeating more enemies than the rest of the cast combined, albeit through the use of gadgets on loan from Piper. This amalgam of a caring ethic and masculine-gendered ability marks Zita as similar to Madrigal, a comparison which is underlined when Zita borrows one of Madrigal’s scarfs and cinches up her clothing in order to mimic her look in front of a mirror.42 This action mirrors what is expected of the girl readers who pick up the text: that they will consider Zita as a model for their own behavior. This is likewise mirrored in the young female Lumponian, who clearly looks up to Zita,43 and who also serves to steel Zita’s resolve when it comes to saving the

42 Hatke, Legends of Zita, 102.
43 Ibid., 189.
Lumponians. Unfortunately, since Zita and Madrigal are the only major female characters, this becomes the sole model of femininity for the reader; a model that is physically capable, but still laboring under an injunction to put other individuals ahead of oneself.

In contrast to Zita and Amulet, Hereville and Foiled have much smaller casts of characters. Thus, while those four texts have similar numbers of female characters in absolute terms, the latter two have proportionally more female characters, but less opportunity to compare differing styles of masculinity and femininity. At the same time, the heavy focus on the protagonist, aided by the fact that the texts never need to shift attention to other characters who are not with the protagonist, allows for a more fully realized character. This potential is further developed by the conventions of intrusion fantasy: Since the reader sees Mirka and Aliera in their normal, everyday context before the introduction of supernatural elements, their identities are grounded in mundane concerns. Unlike Emily and Zita, who are whisked away to strange locales before the reader even knows who they are, Mirka and Aliera are defined apart from the supernatural conflict that provides motion to the story. Significantly, both Mirka and Aliera are defined in large part by their interest in masculine pursuits and the ways in which they are not stereotypically feminine.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, much of Mirka’s character revolves around her rebellion against the expectation that she will develop and perform feminine traits and tasks. She has no skill or interest in knitting or other womanly tasks, and evinces not the slightest thought towards the eventuality that she get married. Instead, her personality revolves around a surfeit of aggression and a desire to slay dragons,\(^{44}\) which translates into a competitive nature and a tendency to try to resolve conflict with violence. In fact, Mirka could easily be swapped with a male protagonist if not for two important considerations: The way her masculine behavior puts

\(^{44}\) Deutsch, Hereville: Sword, 72.
her in conflict with the standards of her community, and her close relationships with the maternal figures in her life. While most of the supporting cast in *Hereville* only exists to provide exposition and to point out to her (and by extension, the reader) her severe lack of self-awareness, the way she still misses her mother forms an important aspect of her character, and she frequently goes to Fruma for advice. This advice is instrumental to Mirka, as it frequently occurs that the supernatural problems she faces cannot be resolved by the direct, masculine approach. She cannot defeat the troll in physical combat or a contest of knitting, so she takes a page out of Fruma’s book and argues with him to play for time and force his concession. When she can’t best her meteoric doppelganger in swordfighting or monster-slaying, she succeeds through a clever trick and by empathizing with Metty enough to realize that she misses her sisters and only needs to be reminded of that fact. Thus, Mirka is established as a masculine character who needs to develop into a more feminine person.

Like Mirka, Aliera is defined first and foremost by a masculine pursuit, in this case fencing, but Aliera’s portrayal of gender is inflected by the contrast between her and Avery. Aliera’s dedication to fencing, her enjoyment of the competition associated with it, and the way she values her independence and individuality in relation to her school’s social cliques all mark her as a masculine character. Conversely, her awkwardness and embarrassment around Avery arising from her crush on him, as well as her considerable insecurity about her appearance and her devotion to her disabled cousin mark her as feminine. Avery, on the other hand, while embodying hegemonic masculinity through his athleticism and his tendency to flirt with every pretty girl he sees, is feminized through Aliera’s perspective. She describes him as “beautiful,” and is very particular about using that descriptor as opposed to the more conventional

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45 Ibid., 94.
46 Ibid., 131–32.
“handsome.” Aliera goes so far as to speculate that Avery might be trans before seeing him with his shirt off (31). Even apart from appearance, circumstances allow Aliera to see Avery apart from his solidly masculine public persona to discover that he is claustrophobic, afraid of the dark, and deeply insecure, due in large part to the fact that he is a troll masquerading as a human. The fact that Aliera and Avery are mirrored mixings of gendered traits is alluded to on the cover of the second volume, where, in a reversal of fantasy conventions, Aliera is the one standing tall and brandishing her sword while Avery is locked in chains at her feet.

*Foiled* incorporates a variety of visual cues which underscore Aliera’s combination of masculine and feminine traits. First and foremost, it is important to note that the text provides several indicators that it represents Aliera’s subject position. Each volume begins with Aliera addressing the audience directly before segueing into a retelling of events, establishing that the voice of the narrator is Aliera’s voice. Furthermore, while the text depicts Aliera in the third person, the reader is still clearly being presented with Aliera’s perspective on events, as the two-tone blue and gray coloration is connected to the fact that Aliera herself is colorblind (41), and images are only depicted in color when she sees them in color through supernatural means (98–99). This means that what is depicted in the text is not a third-person perspective, but Aliera’s own reconstruction of what events must have looked like from the outside, which means that the visual style itself is a window into Aliera’s inner world. With this in mind, the use of blue and gray as the predominant coloration suggests a degree of calm and rationality, not unlike a black-and-white documentary, implying that Aliera is relating events to the readers in as objective a fashion as possible, suggesting masculine patterns of thought. At the same time, however, the linework takes on a feminine sensibility through the predominant use of soft, curved lines and round shapes: The tail of Aliera’s fencing jacket curves slightly as it dangles behind her, and her

48 Yolen and Cavallaro, *Foiled*, 43.
foil is frequently truncated by the border of the panel instead of coming to a sharp point (14–15). Even Aliera’s self-depiction while fencing blurs the lines of masculinity and femininity. The masculinizing effects of her activity and protective gear are countered by the display of her pigtails emerging from behind the mask and the fact that her portrayal in gear is always accompanied by her unmasking herself to reveal a feminine face. Clearly, Aliera sees her masculinity and femininity as intertwined, and refuses to settle things in one direction or another.

The outlier in this discussion is Digger, the only text under analysis that features a predominantly female cast. This creates a variety of models of behavior. Digger herself is most notable for her hard-headed sensibility and devotion to hard work, which is tempered by empathy and a sense of moral responsibility in personal attachments. Grim Eyes, the female hyena hunt leader, is notable for her considerable physical prowess, her position of authority, and her considerable chauvinism towards males participating in what she sees as the female sphere of wilderness survival, all of which can be attributed to hyena culture being a gender-reversed version of human tribal cultures. Similarly, Boneclaw Mother and The Hag, while not powerful physically, are powerful socially, and both are adept at wielding that social power to achieve their ends. Boneclaw Mother, despite being old and almost certainly blind, still has half her tribe convinced she can see through pebbles sewn onto her mask (437), is frighteningly adept at reading people’s motives, and, in Grim Eyes’ words, “[is] good at using her weakness as a bludgeon” (541). Similarly, The Hag, while very young to be filling her position, is a stern disciplinarian with her patients. Moreover, she is willing to go to great lengths to prevent them from being hassled, from facing down armed guards to telling off the statue of a god (201), recognizing that, as a healer, she is “the next best thing to untouchable” (281–83). Finally, the character of Murai, while mentally unstable, represents a uniquely feminine version of strength.

49 Vernon, Digger, 566.
Apart from being an expert in “comparative mythology” (222), she is a model of nonviolent endurance and faith. Murai is a very passive character, in the grand scheme of things, but that passivity is its own strength when she turns it to the task of buying Digger time against Jhalm. As she says: “I do not believe he can send an army against an injured girl with a sword. I believe he will try to convince me to surrender, and that will buy you time” (794). As with Boneclaw Mother, Murai recognizes that weakness can be strength, and so she is able to accomplish her goals without resorting to masculine means of dominance and aggression.

While *Digger* portrays a much broader range of femininity than the other texts under consideration, that does not prevent it from also using a variety of male characters to likewise give various models of masculinity. The first male character Digger encounters is Ed, a male hyena who, after an initial attempt to ambush Digger, becomes her closest friend and displays a variety of non-hegemonic traits. He is very friendly and expresses emotion freely, but is also concerned for his estranged child, lonely, ridden with guilt, and terrified of losing his only friend in Digger (406). The Statue of Ganesh is something of a strange case, since he is an inanimate object embodying the personality and traits of the deity he represents. However, he is treated as male by association with the male deity Ganesh and referred to using male terminology by the other characters (in contrast to the Shadowchild, a truly genderless demon child who is never referred to with gendered pronouns by any character). The Statue wields spiritual authority with wisdom and compassion, doing his best to guide the other characters to better outcomes without directly ordering them (374), and noting that he is, in his own words, “not a smiting god” (362). The other male character of note is Jhalm, commander of the Veiled, an armed religious police force, and one of the primary antagonists of the text. Jhalm is the most hegemonically masculine of the text’s characters, taking a strict, authoritarian stance, approaching situations rationally, and displaying a willingness to use physical force to achieve his ends. That being said, the text resists
viliying him. Jhalm is portrayed tragically, as opposed to villainously; he is not evil so much as working off of insufficient information, and he is unwilling to give Digger the benefit of the doubt long enough to see that they are essentially on the same side. Thus, Digger manages to portray a variety of male and female characters without necessarily taking sides as to which combination of traits is the most positive.

Taken as a group, all of these texts take a similar stance on the ideal female protagonist. Each heroine combines a certain degree of masculine skill at physical activities with a feminine emphasis on personal attachments and emotional expression. This may be a necessary part of being an active protagonist as a story, as active participation itself is characterized as masculine by a patriarchal worldview. More precisely, this may be a requirement of protagonists in the fantasy genre specifically, given the emphasis on epic, world-spanning conflicts, and the use of physical violence to resolve said conflicts, common to that genre. Thus, the adoption of the tomboy archetype as the default heroine in this genre may be the necessary price of admission to traditionally male-dominated narratives. Unfortunately, the general lack of supporting female characters that strike different notes than the heroines limits the ability of these texts to counteract stereotypes through a variety of depictions, and risks making these heroines the de facto standard of behavior for girls. Furthermore, the predominance of male characters apart from the protagonist in these texts suggests that while they are ostensibly directed at girls, they are covertly aimed at boys simultaneously, and this also plays a role in the overall characterization: If the heroine is too feminine, this may put off the ever-elusive boy audience, and so characterization is a compromise between presenting an appealing female character and not alienating potential male readers.

In the final analysis, these heroines fall well within the bounds of the typical postfeminist protagonist. In addition to being constructed as freely choosing individuals, as established in the
previous chapter, they all speak on some level to the postfeminist protagonist who is trying to “have it all.” While showing a degree of success in traditionally masculine spheres, they are also expected to have feminine inclinations towards caring and nurturance. And when confronted with a conflict between these dichotomous structures, they are expected to choose the traditionally feminine approach and put their accomplishments at risk for the sake of personal attachments. While these heroines do not face the same pressure towards sexualization as adult postfeminist characters and they are not pushed to abandon their masculine pursuits entirely, the stakes are the fate of a world as opposed to a personal career, after all, masculinity and femininity are still presented as antagonistic forces within the female subject. Even this would not necessarily be problematic, if not for the aforementioned general lack of variety in the genre, and for the way in which the texts blithely avoid commentary on the societal pressures facing these heroines. That they are treated as freely acting individuals in the presence of elided social expectations surrounding gender is what is ultimately cause for concern.
CHAPTER III: GENDERED ASSUMPTIONS IN THE GAPS

Postfeminist texts are characterized by the assumption that gender equality has been achieved, and so any social or cultural pressures which might influence a woman’s decision-making have been vacated. This is perhaps their most problematic trait from a feminist standpoint, as it implies (if not outright states) that feminism as a movement is unnecessary, and obscures the reality of those unequal structures still in place. The presence or absence of gendered social pressures is generally subtextual in the texts under consideration here. Likely owing to a desire to appear inoffensive, these texts avoid openly discussing gender or gender politics for the most part. As a result, these texts imply the postfeminist position by presenting female characters as though they are unconstrained by their gender. Certainly, since some of these texts portray alternate spaces, it is possible that there are no gendered expectations in the magical world of Alledia or the vastness of outer space. The fact remains, however, that these texts have been created in a patriarchal context, and corresponding gendered assumptions have made their way into the text. The implications of gender equality are undermined by these assumptions, which further limits their ability to either encourage non-traditional roles or support feminist activism aimed at removing the unequal structures which are reinforced by said gendered expectations.

It is important to note that the fantasy genre’s use of alternate spaces and impossible plot elements does not necessarily make it a progressive genre. While the potential to use these elements to push for a better world exists, the predominant plot structure of fantasy lends itself more to conservativism. As John Clute discusses in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, fantasy narratives tend to involve a world corrupted or “thinned” by a dark power which must be “healed” by the protagonist’s actions.\(^{50}\) This lends itself to a marked tendency towards looking

\(^{50}\) John Clute and John Grant, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 339.
backwards in fantasy texts; the reader’s attention is directed towards a previous, nostalgia-tinged golden age, which must be protected or reinstated. This is in contrast to science fiction, which similarly uses impossible plot elements but as a way of directing the reader forwards towards a better world than has previously existed. As a result, fantasy texts are not predisposed towards advancing social progress, though authors have made use of it for this purpose.

Both *Zita* and *Amulet* studiously avoid any gendered references beyond the necessity of using gendered pronouns in English, and both take place in alternate spaces which could conceivably lack the sort of gender expectations that exist in the real world. Both texts conspicuously avoid commenting on the gender of any character; the fact that Zita is a girl is never the topic of conversation in *Zita*, and Emily’s gender is only directly referred to once in a non-event where a character who has not met her uses the wrong pronoun, is corrected, and the topic is dropped without further comment.\(^{51}\) Clearly, these texts would like to treat gender as a non-issue, which could arguably be seen as a positive move, as it allows the heroines to be strong without defining them by their gender. As Rosalind Gill notes, however, postfeminist themes of personal empowerment often “coexist with, and are structured by, stark and continuing inequalities.”\(^{52}\) While the texts attempt to elide gender, the gender distribution of the casts, as well as the distribution of importance and authority, give lie to the implications of a gender-blind space.

That gendered expectations are in fact at play in *Zita* and *Amulet* is made obvious as soon as one breaks down the proportions of the cast and the distribution of roles by gender. As mentioned in the previous chapter, *Zita* is ambiguous in this respect, but the clear signalling of female members in otherwise ambiguous alien species implies that most of the aliens we see are male, and the main characters all have clearly indicated genders which are predominantly male.

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\(^{51}\) Kibuishi, *Amulet*, 2:75.

\(^{52}\) Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 149.
*Amulet* is much more stark in its portrayals, as the vast majority of characters are clearly indicated as male visually. Tellingly, these males characters fill virtually every position of importance not occupied by Emily herself. Nearly every guard and soldier is male; every leader apart from Emily, military or political, from the Elf King to the Guardian Council stretching back into history, is male. The only female character approaching a position of power or authority is Selina, the owner of a fuel stop who only has any bearing on the text for a span of twenty pages in the third volume before she is promptly forgotten. Which begs the question: are these settings really absent of gender roles if women are so conspicuously absent? The only female soldier in *Amulet* is Alyson Hunter, who plays only an ancillary role in the story, and is doubly subordinated to Navin and her father. Obviously, there are unstated rules in play which keep women from participating in the public sphere.

In contrast, *Digger* calls explicit attention to socially enforced gender roles and in the process makes a criticism by analogy of real world expectations. Hyena culture in Rath is a gender-flipped interpretation of human tribal hunter-gatherer societies. Female hyenas are larger and stronger than male hyenas, do all the hunting and fighting, and fill all dominant leadership roles, while male hyenas fill domestic roles such as mate, healer, and skin painter. This gender division is explained by their origin myths, which place the original male hyena, He-Is, in the role of being tempted by a demon and bringing a form of original sin down on the hyena race. In this way, male hyenas as a group are made to be responsible for their own inferiority, as well as the high infant mortality rates among firstborn hyena children.\(^5^3\) This is analogous to the stance in some Judeo-Christian traditions that Eve is ultimately responsible for the Fall, and that women’s subordinate position is part and parcel of God’s divine judgment. That this origin myth is related so early in *Digger* serves to characterize all its depictions of hyena culture within that

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\(^{53}\) Vernon, *Digger*, 174.
framework. Ed’s experience as a victim of domestic violence leading up to his exile is told within similar terms (515), and it serves as a backdrop for Grim Eyes’ chauvinism (564). The text even obliquely calls attention to the uncertainty of attempting to create social change via Owl Caller’s rhetorically asking: “Without tradition, what protection do any of my brothers and I have, except the good will of women?” (433). Tradition binds male hyenas to an inferior position, but it also provides what few safeguards they have against abuse. And it is obvious to anyone familiar with gender politics that these situations and concerns are directly relatable to problems in human gender relations.

While *Digger* reserves the majority of its explicit gender commentary to hyena culture (with a few tidbits about wombat norms thrown in), it is not absent of implications of gendered expectations in human society. Similar to the other texts under consideration, it does not explicitly call out gender roles in play with regards to humans, but the greater prominence of female characters in the text throws the underlying gender norms at play into sharper relief. The Hag is specifically called out as filling a female role in society while the question: “don’t you have old women who *run* things?” (149), and while her sphere of influence is limited and subjected to being overruled by the Veiled (143), a religious police force, it is also true that she can exert considerable power in her narrow, gendered, space of authority.

The Veiled themselves are clearly male-dominated, likely due to their status as an armed police force, with the only female member depicted being Mirai, who was recruited out of the priesthood for a specific mission and only retained because Jhalm felt responsible for the madness she contracted as a result of that mission (381; 384). While this is not explicitly linked to Mirai’s gender, her explanation of the events focuses much more closely on her young age for such an assignment, there is a clear gendered subtext in terms of Mirai’s characterization as weak, passive, and potentially hysterical, not to mention Jhalm’s masculine shame at putting a
girl in harm’s way to achieve his organization’s goals. All of which becomes critical to the plot when Mirai buys Digger time by making a lone stand against Jhalm and his guards. Mirai’s statement, quoted in the previous chapter, bears repeating here, to consider its subtextual implications for gender norms in *Digger*: “An honorable man might send an army against a single defender, but I do not believe that he can send an injured girl with a sword” (794, emphasis mine). Her social leverage against Jhalm is strengthened by her gender and the traditional treatment of women as weak and unacceptable targets for military aggression. Furthermore, Jhalm’s reaction to Mirai is telling. He is first excessively concerned about her broken arm in a sling, treating her as physically fragile (823). Once he realizes her goal is to delay him, he points out her *mental* fragility, gaslighting her in a bid to make her surrender:

Murai...I know you are doing what you believe is right, but are you certain you are not becoming...confused again? You know that sometimes you are not entirely reliable. Are you certain you are not having one of your episodes? (824)

While this certainly makes a statement about the problematic ways in which the mentally ill are treated by those considered psychologically “normal,” it also has clear gender implications given the historical association with this technique and the victimization of women. Jhalm is explicitly playing off of Mirai’s history of mental illness, but he is implicitly taking advantage of his social power as a male authority figure passing judgment on a woman’s mental fitness. By characterizing Jhalm’s action as unethical and immoral, the text implicitly critiques socially constructed gender expectations even though it does not explicitly call them out.

Unlike the alternate spaces envisioned by *Digger, Zita, and Amulet, Hereville* and *Foiled* ostensibly exist within our own world. This means that they exist within real life considerations of gender roles and expectations and necessarily make an implicit statement on those norms in the way they address, or fail to address, said norms. *Foiled* takes place within the confines of
contemporary New York City and yet is, perhaps unsurprisingly, unwilling to directly interrogate structural concerns. Aliera’s insecurity about her appearance is likely encouraged by her immersion in a culture that values women primarily for a certain kind of beauty. Even though she avoids visual media that would directly push such a line of thinking, she is still subject to the expectations of her peers, who seem more inclined to embrace variations on hegemonic notions of beauty. Furthermore, there is a clear gendered double-standard on display in the way Avery is able to flirt with (and in some cases, make out with) every attractive girl in school without reproach, while Aliera has to vigorously repress the urge to label these girls as “skanks.”\footnote{Yolen and Cavallaro, Foiled, 6.} Not only does the text fail to interrogate this double-standard, it goes so far as to render Avery’s behavior in a sympathetic light as resulting from his own insecurity at being not entirely human. Thus, the text not only fails to explicitly address the social forces that make Avery’s behavior pass unreproached, it discourages the reader from making an independent judgment.

*Hereville* may be the most complex text under examination when it comes to the interplay of structural concerns and the discussion of gender. The text has a habit of raising conflicts based on the mismatch between Mirka’s personality and the social expectations of her community based on her gender, without actually making explicit commentary on said expectations. The setting of *Hereville* in the eponymous fictional Hasidic Jewish community creates a unique tension between Mirka’s tomboyish behavior and the culture in which she lives, but the text is unwilling to address this tension directly. Cultural standards related to gender segregation, collectively referred to as “Negiah”\footnote{Deutsch, *Hereville: Sword*, 68.} are alluded to at various points but not interrogated, which is surprising, considering they are at the root of many of Mirka’s social conflicts. The talking pig’s vendetta against Mirka forces her into a compromising position with regards to her community, as it causes her to violate cultural taboos, such as by pushing her
down a hill and into a backyard where men have gathered, and put her entire family’s reputation at risk. As Mirka’s sister, Gittel, lays it out:

What if the shadchen [marriage broker] hears that Chaya’s sister barged into a backyard full of unrelated men? And so he decides that the best men should meet a girl who’s family isn’t so weird?…just imagine our Chaya married to…a man who’s mean and cold.

Or one who HURTS her. (42)

Notably, everyone present, including Mirka herself, constructs this hypothetical state of affairs as being Mirka’s fault. Like Aliera, Mirka internalizes the problems which arise from her failure to meet social expectations of gender; there is no interrogation of the role the shadchen plays in determining the girls’ futures, nor the apparent lack of agency the girls have in dealing with a potential bad marriage. And while Mirka’s family is threatened as a unit by the disapproval of her community, the response is not collective, but individual, and aims not at a change to better circumstances, but a return of the status quo. Mirka absorbs this to such an extent that she becomes determined not to make waves in her community; after she chases off a pair of bullies threatening the pig and her younger brother Zindel, she firmly swears him to secrecy (69). Rather than trying to assert her agency or challenge the conditions of her community, she instead opts to keep quiet and hope she can pass by unnoticed.

Mirka’s unwillingness to challenge the confining expectations of her community is mirrored by the narrator’s unwillingness to comment upon them. Unlike Foiled or Digger, where the narration is clearly done in the voice of the protagonist, Hereville’s narrator is shown to be distinct from Mirka when the narrator demonstrates knowledge Mirka does not have. The narrator frequently has the role of explaining particular facets of Hereville’s culture to the (presumed non-Jewish) reader, and in so doing has a tendency to put a positive spin on the culture, reinforcing its structures without calling attention to how they act on Mirka. This is most
noticeable when, smack dab in the center of the first volume, the narrative literally takes the Sabbath off and is put on hold for several pages while the narrator describes how Hereville celebrates *Shabbos* in glowing terms. In contrast to Mirka’s visible irritation with the pre-*Shabbos* chores and boredom with *Shabbos* activities such as prayer and youth group, the narrator describes the activities with enthusiasm marked by the frequent use of exclamation points, calling attention to the “vibrant, passionate discussions!” of the youth group and noting that “naps on Shabbos afternoon are twelve times as refreshing as naps taken any other day!” (82). The narrator’s effusive valorization is further supported by the central place this interlude occupies in the text. Not only does it fall in the middle of the text, but it functions as a central pivot between Mirka receiving knowledge of the sword’s location and setting out to seek it. Thus, the religious and cultural institutions of Hereville are emphasized as positive and reinforced even as they interrupt Mirka’s story and downplay her own views on the matter.

In contrast to the narrator’s positive portrayal of the *Shabbos* celebration, the explanations of other cultural mores of Hereville, in particular those which separate genders and restrict Mirka’s agency, are phrased neutrally and presented as surface observations. It is clear from the *Shabbos* interlude that the narrator is not obliged to maintain an objective tone, and so the implication is that the narrator has no further commentary to offer on such matters, as opposed to having to refrain from criticism. For example, the narrator explains that the school in Hereville requires girls to wear identical, demure uniforms consisting of long sleeved shirts and long skirts, but notes “that doesn’t mean they all dress alike!” (37). before demonstrating the limited ways in which the girls can modify their uniforms in order to declare their identity. In this way, the narrator naturalizes the gendered expectations of the community, disinviting value judgments from the reader.
Clearly, all of the texts under consideration have some degree of structural inequality embedded within them. This in and of itself is not uncommon or unexpected. What is problematic is the way in which these structural inequalities selectively disappear for the heroines without being addressed or simply pass unremarked. It downplays the existence of gendered expectations, discouraging interrogation of, and action against, these issues by implying that they are not issues at all. As with postfeminism in general, it is assumed that the only barriers standing between the individual and fulfillment are personal ones, naturalizing the gender gap in society. In other words, the heroine is a particularly strong-willed individual who overcomes her natural disposition to femininity to take her place alongside men instead of one who overcomes social oppression to break down barriers for women in general. The activist impetus is disarmed in favor of conventional gender roles.
CONCLUSION

As can be seen, these fantasy comics are progressive enough to allow their heroines enough agency to sell their status as protagonists. Despite the tendency of protagonists in portal-quest and intrusion fantasy narratives to be naive and dependent on more experienced guides, each heroine is nominally able to make important decisions about how to proceed, who to trust, and who to help. Even Emily, whose agency is challenged the most and who is the most constrained in her ability to chart her own course, is able to make vital decisions as she makes her way through Alledia, and that agency shows signs of growing stronger as of the fifth volume of the series. These heroines are not arbitrarily confined by their gender, either in the source of their power, or in the way they are treated by those around them. This may be an instance where the conventions of children’s literature works in favor of these texts: the trend towards presenting young protagonists as capable while avoiding obviously patronizing attitudes means that the heroines under consideration are treated as people as opposed to children in need of sheltering. The resistance to infantilizing children within stories intended for them means that these heroines are in less danger of being forced into a passive situation due to their gender.

While these texts succeed from the standpoint of positioning their protagonists as active characters, the situation is a bit more mixed once one starts looking at the distribution of gendered traits amongst their all their characters. While a tomboyish heroine who combines masculine-coded capability and assertiveness with a feminine ethic of caring is preferable to a passive heroine, the fact that each text strikes a very similar tone with its protagonist is a point of concern. In isolation, these protagonists are positive, nuanced characters. Taken together and considered with an eye towards children’s media in general, they are replacing one stereotype with another. Rather than present a variety of ways of being that would more thoroughly weaken gendered stereotypes and provide a set of options for girls, they push one message for what
empowered femininity looks like. This message is reinforced by the general absence of other prominent female characters who could provide an alternative. With the exception of Digger, the female characters apart from the protagonists in these texts fill minor roles that prevent them from presenting fleshed out possibilities to the reader. Even if one were to argue that a fantasy narrative requires a certain type of protagonist, there is no reason why secondary characters can’t establish different ways of being. Indeed, these texts do end up providing a variety of possibilities for potential male readers in the supporting casts. Especially in the case of Amulet and Zita, which have comparatively expansive casts of male characters, these texts provide several different models of masculinity. This may be a case of overcompensation; in the absence of a male protagonist for boys to identify with, the texts provide several different potential points of identification in order to court the elusive male reading audience.

In a larger sense, the concentration of male characters in the casts of these texts is part of a more significant problem with their portrayal of gender. The tendency to marginalize female characters aside from the protagonists is strongly suggestive of a set of gendered assumptions about the roles of women. Rather than address this gap and explore the implications of it, these texts choose instead to dodge the issue of gender entirely, conspicuously avoiding any explicit attention to it. This has the effect of implying a gender-neutral environment while simultaneously displaying a distribution of roles that is indicative of structural inequalities. Since there are no apparent barriers preventing the heroines from being active leaders and public problem solvers, the reader is expected to believe that any girl could do what they do, despite the fact that there are few other girls in evidence. In other words, these texts exemplify the tendency in postfeminist discourse to personalize gender issues and elide notions of cultural gender discrimination.
From a feminist standpoint, these texts are problematic for the very reason that they imply that there is no need for social activism for gender equality despite indications to the contrary. This is another side effect of the majority male casts of characters: opportunities for women to band together and assert that they have common cause are curtailed. Even when there are multiple female characters in the same text, they are often sectioned off from each other so that in the end the reader is presented with a series of personal struggles instead of a show of solidarity. Feminist action is preempted by the implication of its irrelevance. In the process, the gender divisions on display in the texts are naturalized, creating the impression that women in general are content in the private sphere, and it is only individuals of exceptional will who overcome this tendency to become heroic.

To be sure, these texts would be far less problematic if these issues were limited to individual instances. There are a lot of positive things to be said for the way these comics portray their heroines as developed characters with complex motivations, and it is certainly not necessary for every children’s comic to grapple explicitly with issues of gender. It is the fact that they constitute one part of a larger trend towards the disavowal of structural inequality that renders them problematic. And if one is going to suggest a fictional society where gender is a non-issue, it behooves one to make sure that society actually appears gender blind. A world like Alledia, where leadership and martial excellence are both presented as nearly exclusively masculine endeavors, is not convincingly gender blind, no matter how much the characters refrain from commenting on the genders of individuals. It is worth noting that the series which are still being published do appear to be working towards correcting this issue; the introduction of characters like Alyson in *Amulet* and Madrigal in *Zita*, along with slightly more prominent roles for minor female characters in *Foiled* and *Hereville*, suggests that there is some awareness of this issue already. That being said, there is still more ground that needs to be covered.
It is also important to take into account the limitations of this study before making sweeping judgments. The recent surge in comics aimed at young readers is much larger than these five texts, so their ability to speak to larger trends in the industry is limited. Much insight could be gained by a comparative look at how male-driven fantasy comics deal with these same issues. Furthermore, there are many female-driven texts which are not so heavily embedded in the fantasy genre, and which therefore might take a different approach to portraying femininity by presenting different conflicts in need of resolution. There is a general lack of critical attention to children’s comics which means that large sections of the field are still unexplored. Comics scholars could stand to gain by demonstrating that comics can be taken seriously when they are aimed at kids and not just when they focus on adult stories. Children’s literature scholars likewise are neglecting an interesting permutation in their field which has the potential to bridge the gap between children’s picture books and young adult prose novels.

It is that potential of these texts to bridge gaps, both in terms of rhetoric and for children’s literacy, which makes this project truly significant. These comics are aimed at the age group where kids often drop out of reading in favor of other media; a thorough understanding of the potential strengths of middle-grade comics as a strategy for capturing the attention of marginal readers has the capability of making them that much more effective. And from a feminist standpoint, pre-adolescent readers are perhaps the group most in need of a frank discussion of what gender roles society will push them into all the harder as they undergo puberty. This area require future research and future advocacy.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


