

Portraying Femininity

by Katie Trail

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I can't remember a time in my life when I didn't love to read. Fiction – and especially fantasy – has always been my favorite genre, and I always identified strongly with the lead female character (often the only female character) in whatever book I was reading. Lead, protagonist, or sidekick, it didn't matter: the most prominent female was always my favorite. When I was young, it never occurred to me to question the portrayal of a female lead – she was a girl keeping up with the guys and saving the world, what more did I need to know? No matter her appearance or personality, she was exactly who I wanted to be. When I was young, she was usually a sidekick (there weren't many books about dragons and wizards with female leads), but as I got older, I started finding young adult books centered on female protagonists. *Finally!* I thought, *Some girls taking the lead!* But the more female leads I found, the more I struggled to find any substantial difference between them and the male protagonists I grew up reading. "So the lead's name is Jennifer this time instead of John. I don't see much difference otherwise... when do the dragons show up?"

However, this didn't really bother me until I reached high school when, upon reading Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, I finally recognized the glaring issue: many (if not all) of my favorite female leads were written as if they were men, and Katniss from *The Hunger Games* may have

been the worst example. She and the other female heroes I had read were so masculinized that if they had been replaced with male characters, the story would have changed very little. The secondary female characters who acted more femininely (if there were any) were constantly in trouble or in the way. This gendered weakness/strength dichotomy bothered me for a few reasons: Why would writers use it to characterize women? And how was it that we finally had female heroes, but they were essentially guys with long hair?

It turns out that masculinizing female heroes has been an ongoing problem, and it probably started with simple attempts to get women into more interesting roles because, sadly, there was a time when women had even fewer interesting roles than we do now. According to Lily Rothman, writing for *Time* magazine in 2014, gender dynamics in young adult media have changed dramatically since the category's creation in the early- to mid-1900s, when writers realized they could target teens separately from adults and children. Author Samuel Youd first bridged this gap with dystopian fiction when he wrote his classic *Tripod* series for young adults in the 1960s (Rothman). This trilogy about a race of three-legged robots ruling the Earth featured a team of "hot-headed boys" taking on the robots without any significant aid or input from the girls in the book, who mostly got kidnapped and put on display Sleeping Beauty-style by the giant robots (Rothman). Like other writers in the early days of young adult literature, Youd put almost no effort into the representation of women (Rothman), and the women he did include were helpless or trophies to be won by male heroes.

Today, teenage girls constitute about 75 percent of all young adult literature readers (Rutell), so it's no surprise that we see far more women depicted as substantial characters in modern young adult media (although more than none does *not* imply a sufficient number or quality portrayal). Women are especially common in dystopian fiction like *The Hunger*

Games, where the battle to save the future of society can function as an obstacle for a young couple to overcome (Rothman). In her article on young adult dystopian fiction, Rothman cites at least five relatively new dystopian series that contain significant female roles, including *The Hunger Games*. In a way *The Hunger Games* series stands as a landmark in young adult fiction because it seems to be the one of the first works to truly take the representation of women seriously – it is certainly one of the first series I’ve ever read that left me able to name roughly equal lists of interesting male characters *and* interesting female characters. However, *The Hunger Games* is still problematic because as much as it manages to represent diverse, interesting females, it still represents femininity in women as a weakness and masculinity as a strength.

Possibly the most problematic representation of women in *The Hunger Games* is Katniss Everdeen herself. She draws a large fan base among young girls and teens because of her independence, self-reliance, and intelligence, and she is complex in ways that elevate her beyond the two-dimensional “strong female character” that has plagued books and screens for the last several years (McDougall). But as a female protagonist, she still holds more masculine characteristics than any other female in the series. Her physical strength, skill at hunting, and will to fight are what keeps her alive through two Hunger Games (annual televised events in which teenagers are forced to fight to the death) and a war, but when combined with her emotional restraint, impulsiveness, and ineptitude at expressing herself verbally, they make her seem like a man in a woman’s body. When seen from this angle, it seems that if we replaced Katniss with a teenage boy, the only part of the storyline that would really be affected would be the love interests (“Feminist”). She is one of only a few female characters to live through the entire series, and she survives almost entirely because of her masculine traits. In fact, the only obviously

feminine trait she is left with, her nurturing, maternal side, is often what gets her into the most trouble.

Katniss first enters the Games because she is trying to protect her younger sister, Prim. During the Games, Katniss almost dies protecting another young girl named Rue, whom she views as another little sister. When she starts caring for Peeta later in the Games, she nearly dies again trying to get medicine to save his life. In the third book, she is almost crushed in an explosion while trying to save her little sister’s cat. Katniss repeatedly acts without regard for her own safety and puts herself in serious danger by acting on her motherly (feminine) instincts, which makes it seem like her femininity is an impulse or a weakness. This idea is enforced when President Snow coerces her into playing her love interest Peeta’s “star crossed lover” to discourage the uprisings the Districts have started in her name. She acts gentle, subordinate, and generally plays up her more conventionally feminine traits for the cameras in order to seem less threatening to Snow and less like a rebel leader to the people of Panem. By making her femininity seem weak, Collins suggests that Katniss’s real strengths lie in her masculine characteristics, which poses the question, “Why can’t femininity be a strength too?” One of Collins’s other characters actually does manage to use both masculine and feminine traits to her advantage, but not necessarily for good.

President Alma Coin of District 13 – the leader of the rebellion and the only woman in a position of serious power – is masculinized much like Katniss, but in a more sinister way. She parallels the main (or, “male”) antagonist, President Snow of the Capitol, in many ways, such as her emotional detachment, ability to strategize, and skill at manipulation. The only obvious femininity we see in her is when she feigns empathy to manipulate Katniss and other characters into acting in ways that would contribute to her own ulterior agenda. But even

here, used under her own free will, femininity is only an asset because (once again) it makes her come across as unthreatening. The implications of these characterizations are troubling. Making a female protagonist such as Katniss extremely masculine in a book where so many more feminine characters die suggests that masculinity is what is needed to survive and thrive, while attributing so many masculine characteristics to the only female character in power further suggests that femininity is a weakness that holds women back. Other female characters in this series further enforce this idea with their own behaviors and experiences.

Mrs. Everdeen, Katniss's mother, may be the weakest character in the entire series. When we meet her, she is recovering from a severe depression that has left her practically catatonic after the death of Katniss's father. Her grief forces Katniss to take responsibility for the survival of what remains of her family at the age of eleven, and although Mrs. Everdeen improves some over the course of the series, she never really becomes fully functional. She is always on the brink of retreating into her own mind again, and Katniss never really trusts her to care for herself or Prim on her own (Loobek). In fact, another instance in which Katniss shows masculinity is in her dominance over her mother, who takes on a clearly submissive role in Katniss's more masculine presence (Loobek; "Feminist"). When Katniss leaves for the Games, she makes her mother swear not to let herself fall into depression again and to take care of Prim. When Prim dies, we see Mrs. Everdeen's weakness coming out again, and Katniss has to shout at her mother to keep her from retreating into a depressed state. It would be hard to blame her for struggling like this as she suffers the loss of half of her family, but many of the masculine characters in the series lose people they love without falling apart. Peeta loses his entire family and his home, but he manages to keep fighting. Katniss loses all the same people her mother

does, but instead of giving up, she takes charge and cares for those around her. Mrs. Everdeen gives up on everything. She acts as a stereotypical submissive female, incapable of managing her life without a more masculine figure in charge, and her weakness is attributed to her femininity. Because Collins portrays her femininity as a weakness that needs to be supported by Katniss's masculine strength, it comes across as a problem that needs to be worked around. But why should her femininity be blamed for her weakness? Weak characters aren't a problem—they are often a crucial part of developing a plot—but blaming femininity for her weakness creates a very negative image for femininity. By making femininity seem like a weakness to be contrasted with masculine strength, Collins perpetuates a requirement for masculinity in strong characters to her audience, and so tells young girls that they need to act like boys to be strong.

Collins' Effie Trinket poses yet another problem. She is a Capitol native and acts as Katniss's escort during her time in the Capitol for the Games. Her name, Trinket, suggests that she is ornamental, and that seems to be her purpose. She stands for everything that is wrong with the Capitol—the capitol of this fictional world and a place of extreme wealth, excess, and frivolity—in a very feminized way. Her extremely shallow personality and obsession with manners, appearances, and decorum often infuriate the people around her because, when compared to the corruption and danger that surround her, these concerns are extremely inconsequential. She focuses so much on these trivial matters that she remains completely unaware of the more serious, often life-threatening implications of what goes on around her for the majority of the series. These faults could be ascribed to her luxurious upbringing in the Capitol, but by juxtaposing her with more down-to-earth, masculine Capitol residents like Cina, Katniss's stylist, and President Snow, these faults are implicitly attributed to her hyper-femininity—what masculine character is

concerned about damaging a mahogany table when lives are at stake?

All of these women are characterized negatively by their femininity in Collins' books, but she does not color men negatively for being masculine *or* for being feminine. The men in these books are shown as developed characters with substantial abilities to impact the plot, no matter how masculine or feminine they appear.

Gale is Katniss's closest friend, hunting partner, and one part of the love triangle around Katniss. As Kelsey Wallace notes, he seems to be the example of conventional masculinity, and shares many traits with Katniss, including physical strength, a dominant personality, skill at hunting, and a lack of emotional expression (Wallace). When the war breaks out, Gale's strength and quick judgement allow him to rise quickly through the ranks of the rebel military to eventually land on the elite squad with Katniss and other powerful fighters (Wallace). No one ever forces him to tone down his masculinity as Snow and others ask Katniss to do. Neither does he feel the need to pretend to be more masculine or more feminine to advance his interests the way Coin does. Gale simply goes through life as himself, and while his life is far from easy, he never has to pretend or change to achieve anything, especially once he joins the military. And on the rare occasion that he chooses to show a more feminine side—such as when he expresses his feelings for Katniss—his display is never mistakable for weakness. It seems that occasional displays of traditionally feminine qualities are okay if you're male.

Peeta is another boy from the same town as Katniss and is the remaining member of the love triangle in the series. Peeta exhibits several typically feminine traits. He can't hunt, he feels comfortable expressing his thoughts and feelings, and his talents lie in baking and painting. Yet no one ever questions his masculinity or punishes him for his femininity. Katniss has to save him so frequently he verges on becoming the series' "damsel in distress." Yet no one calls his

masculinity into question (Wallace), and no one calls him weak. He frequently and openly expresses his feelings for Katniss, comforts dying tributes in the arena, and makes emotional appeals to the people of the Capitol, all of his own free will. No one forces him to do these things as they do Katniss, and no one mocks or dismisses him as they do Effie. Instead, Peeta is treated as a hero, even though his strengths aren't necessarily in his masculinity. Unlike with Katniss, Collins felt no need to make him extremely masculine in order to make him an acceptable hero (Wallace), which seems to say that femininity is okay as long as you are male, as though this "weakness" can be countered by physical strength or by the stronger position in society that men tend to naturally occupy. Women, it seems, don't inherently possess these alternatives and so must work to make up for their inherent weakness by being more masculine in personality and behavior.

The most terrifying part of all this? Most people see this series as a fantastic representation of female power ("What's"). A 2015 segment of *The Today Show* on NBC suggested that *The Hunger Games* could be the start of a "move to more gender neutral novels" (Morales and Roker) with better gender representation across all levels of characters. At first glance, this seems to be true: The diverse list of female characters in Collins's book is definitely impressive, and it avoids following too many stereotypical character tropes. When compared to many of today's young adult novels, which usually offer one "strong female character" who is expected to be strong enough to represent the entire female population (McDougall), Collins' portrayals of diverse and interesting women seem successful. The problem arises when people fail to look beyond that comparatively small success. Readers see a lead protagonist who is self-reliant and doesn't feel the need to kill wantonly to make a point about her strength. They see a variety of interesting, well-developed female supporting characters. Readers find male characters who aren't afraid to show

traditionally feminine traits, and they notice women being given more dialogue relative to their male counterparts than in the vast majority of similar media. They say "Oh yay! It passed the Bechdel test¹, so it *must* be a great representation of women!" They see all the advances that this series has made in its category of media, and they completely miss all of its overwhelming shortcomings. They ignore the gender issues that hide in plain sight throughout the plot ("What"). They mistake Katniss's masculinity for "strength" and Effie's shallowness for femininity, yet at the same time they applaud Peeta for expressing his feelings. It seems that as long as no one questions these inconsistencies, media representations of women will never improve, and that is a terrifying thought. *The Hunger Games* is by far the most fair and diverse representation of women I've seen, and it is still a discredit to women everywhere. It shows femininity in women as a weakness to be hidden or overcome and masculinity as a prerequisite for power and success, but more than anything it shows that we still have a long, long way to go to achieve fair and equal gender portrayal in media.

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¹ The Bechdel test is a minimalist standard for measuring the representation of women in media. To pass it, a work must include 1) two or more women 2) who talk to each other 3) about something other than a man.