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# Boys, Blood and Bubblegum A Creative Look at the Inequity Faced by Female Identifying Authors

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Boys, Blood and Bubblegum A Creative Look at the Inequity Faced by Female  
Identifying Authors

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for Graduation in the Honors College

By  
Angelica Whitehorne  
Creative Writing, Women and Gender Studies, and International Studies Major

The College at Brockport  
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## I. The Research:

I click the end of my pen a few times, staring at the wall that stands behind my desk. I am trying to write something, which is often the case for me. The back wall is dressed up with graphics and photos; cropped personalization for my eyes to escape to when the letters on my keyboard begin to blur. Tacked on the wall is a running list of words that I like so much my heart skips a beat whenever I hear them..."glorious, mollify, tangible." There are also little sayings hung up that I've gathered from here and there to remind me of goodness; one says quite simply: 'You are enough.' There is a small flower rising up next to the saying and it is inspirational in that blunt, cheesy way we all sometimes need.

Today specifically, I am trying to write something about what it is like to be a female writer. And I ask myself: "What *is* it like to be a female writer?" I also answer myself (because I've been in my room too long, staring too long at both my computer screen and my collaged wall) and I say, "Well, what is it like to be a woman anything?— hard."

I look back to the "You are enough" sign. I think that being a female writer means worrying if you are enough. Since deep in our past, female authors have

been thought of as inferior to male authors. So much so that, many female authors disguise themselves behind a veil of pseudonyms to escape the “tarnish” of being a female author. This phenomenon has been occurring long before the 1800’s when the Brontë sisters used pseudonyms and continues on today with authors like J.K. Rowling.

Authors have used pseudonyms to conceal their identity for a variety of reasons: to maintain anonymity, to write new genres without damaging their reputation, or to separate their new work from the fame of their name. However, the most complex use of pseudonyms are those created in response to gender discrimination. Female writers use masculine or gender ambiguous names to purposefully conceal their identity. Throughout history women writers like the Brontë sisters and J.K. Rowling have utilized this method of masculine pseudonyms to evade the skewed criticism given to creative works made by women. Female authors use to be coined too hysteric or too ignorant to create literature worthy of readership, recognition, and analysis. Due to the social inequalities of the genders, the work of women was regarded unfairly compared to the work of men. To write freely and avoid the stigmas that can affect the success and distribution of their work, female authors penned male sounding pseudonyms, cloaking themselves as men to earn respect in the literary world.

The act of adopting pseudonyms shows that women writers recognize how patriarchal structures still value male work over female work. To validate this point, I will be comparing the experience of the Brontë sisters in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present-day author, J.K. Rowling, as well as their similar choices of adopting male or gender ambiguous pseudonyms. In addition to studying the discrimination that leads to aliases of gender, I will creatively communicate my personal struggle as a female author through twenty-one of my own poems. In culmination of these aspects, my thesis will prove that there is a continual impact of gender stigmas on female authorship.

Starting in the 1800's, the Brontë sisters were three of the most famous female writers to emerge out of their time period. Each of the sisters wrote at least one novel which is now considered a literary classic. However, in their lifetime, female authors were not seen as respectable and feminine work was not critiqued with the same dignity as work made by men. Therefore, the Brontë sisters collectively decided to use pseudonyms.

Keeping the same last name as each other, the Brontë sisters all became the Bell brothers and each took on their own masculine first name to publish their creative works under. The youngest sister, Anne Brontë, wrote under the pseudonym of Acton Bell. She is the least known of the sisters and her most famous work is entitled 'Agnes Grey.' Emily Brontë was the middle sister, who

wrote the now acclaimed but then overlooked 'Wuthering Heights.' Emily chose to write under the alias of Ellis Bell. Lastly, Charlotte Brontë, the eldest sister, wrote 'Jane Eyre' under the pseudonym of Currier Bell (BBC). Their gendered aliases brought them great success in the world of publication. All three of the sister's had work been published and 'Jane Eyre' was one of the best-selling novels of 1847 (BBC). Throughout all of their publications, the three female authors were assumed to be men.

In 1850, Charlotte wrote a 'Biographical Notice' personally explaining her and her then deceased sisters' decision to hide their gender when publishing their work. In the notice she explains the aspirations of her and her sisters saying, "we had very early established the dream of one day becoming authors" (Brontë). She then explains that because they felt passion for their writing and wanted to make it their profession, they took up the pseudonyms to earn respect.

Charlotte cites the obstacles women writers of her time faced stating: "averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names under those of Currier, Ellis, and Acton Bell; the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because -- without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called 'feminine' -- we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice"

(Brontë). She points out the injustice of that time and the prejudices held against women writers. In her writing it expresses that Charlotte felt as though she had to give up her feminine identity to be taken seriously as an author.

Charlotte Brontë goes on to explain that her sisters recognized that men were given “true praise,” not based on gender but talent. They did not want the negative, gendered “chastisement” or the positive compliments of “flattery” that specifically accompanied critiques of women authors. This touches on the fact that women were and often still are criticized condescendingly or with their gender in mind. A popular cultural phrase today is ‘doing something well, for a girl.’ Charlotte shows she was cognizant of the ways gender affects how feminine creative work is talked about and interpreted. Although unfair, women’s work was and is looked at differently. By removing the feminine aspect of their authorships, the Brontë sisters were attempting to avoid those elements of discrimination.

While pseudonym taking may seem like an outdated practice and mostly is, female writers still struggle to be recognized for their art without restrictions of gender expectations. There are often a verbal or non-verbal underestimations of a woman’s abilities, which affect the worth and opportunity for female identifying authors. And although there has been improvement since the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Brontë sisters wrote, women writers are still discriminated against and there are still underlying disparities in the profession. One organization, named ‘VIDA,

Women in Literary Arts,' works to measure these disparities and present their findings to the public.

In VIDA's own words they are "a non-profit feminist organization committed to creating transparency around the lack of gender parity in the literary landscape." They specifically collect data from publishing companies, measuring how much of each gender each company publishes. In their calculations they include trans women. They have also begun measuring the populations of non-binary authors; however, the percentage of contributing authors is so low that their calculations are mostly based off the binary genders of male and female.

In 2017 VIDA conducted and released their annual data. One of their measurements was based predominantly on the top fifteen publishing literary magazines. The measurements of 2017 show that gender disparity is still very much relevant in the literary world. Their research concludes that "of the 15 publications in our main VIDA Count, only 2 published 50% or more women writers" (VIDA). The first magazine named *Granta* published 53.5% female authors while the other called *Poetry* published exactly 50% female writers in their magazine. Most of the other publishing companies included around 30-45% women; however, some prestigious magazines, such as *The New York Review of Books* and *The London Review of Books*, only included around 20% of women writers in their publications. In these two magazines, for every one women author



published, there are three male authors who are published, creating a largely imbalanced ratio. This imbalance is troubling for women authors who are attempting to be published. When in some magazines women have one-third the chance of being published as men, their gender seems less like an empowering identity and more like a disadvantage.

Furthermore, the amount of women's work accepted at a magazine may be connected with who holds the power at that publishing company. For example, VIDA's data shows that *The Paris Review* published only 35% women in 2016. However, in 2017 their number jumped to 42.7% showing an increasing in publications of women; interestingly, this increase came after the resignation of their chief editor, who was charged with sexual misconduct. *The Paris Review* was the most improved gender parity percentage of all 15 of the magazines in 2017. The Boston Review's editor has also been accused of sexual harassment but remains in his position. Although it cannot be proven as causation, this magazine's percent of women published has dropped almost 10 percent in a year. Meaning it has fallen from 47% in 2016 to 37.8% in 2017 (VIDA).

In contrast to this, the editor and publisher of *Granta* is a woman named Sigrid Rausing and this is the magazine that proves to be the most equitable for publishing women writers. The gender power dynamics in publishing companies complicates the issue of parity further. If there are men in charge of the major

publishing industries and these men are contributing to publishing lower amounts of female work, it shows they do not respect or value women writers the same as men. And it becomes all the more difficult to succeed in or even start a publishing profession with the gender discrimination.

The numbers collected by VIDA show that there is lingering discrimination towards women writers. Women are still published less than men in 13 of the 15 major publishing magazines studied. The sole magazine of all 15 magazines studied to have a majority of women published was run by a woman herself. It is displayed here that male work is favored in most spaces or at least in the top publishing companies quantified in VIDA's research. And although many female authors find success within their gender identity, they still face a lower chance of being published overall.

In an industry predominantly run by men who prioritize publishing other men, women can struggle to thrive as authors and find a space that recognizes them. One Bookseller survey tackled the gender disparity of these companies and their study showed that eighty-four percent of employees were worried about the gender wage gap prevalent in their publishing companies. In the survey the female employees remarked that since female workers are more common in the publishing houses, "men are paid comparatively more to tempt them into the industry" (Bookseller). This is an interesting comparative to women who are minority

workers in STEM fields and not offered the same salary advances, showing that men are valued over women professionally, especially in publishing houses that spend more funds and energy recruiting them.

Furthermore, men in publishing houses also receive raises and promotions exponentially faster according to the survey research. In the workers' responses "many perceived men to be "parachuted" into senior roles from other industries...while their female counterparts struggle to rise through the ranks" (Bookseller). Many commented that this was especially noticeable after the female employees had taken maternity leave. The unequal opportunity within the publishing company leads to less women in leadership positions, and within positions of publishing power. As seen with the VIDA results, the lack of diversity in the leadership of these publishing spaces leads to less diverse publishing. This limits the work we see from all intersectional cross sections of identity, including that of female authorship. As long as women are excluded from positions of publishing power, this patriarchal system will stay intact and anyone who does not fit the status quo of the literary world will struggle to publish.

For the majority of the pieces I write I am channeling the strength to translate my own feminine experiences into authorship, despite the gendered exclusivity of the trade. In my collection of poems entitled *Boys, Blood, and Bubblegum* I am creating space for my girlhood, womanhood, and

authorship— despite the historical undercurrent that my experiences as a female are less marketable, less knowledgeable, and less desirable than a male's. As an author I find that youthful and feminine subject matter is often discriminated against as girly and frivolous. I rebel from these judgments as well as empower and validate my own art and life through my poems. In a poem called "Lament 17" that didn't fit into the collection, I grapple with the anger of being underestimated or patronized by my society. It goes as follows:

### **Lament #17**

The town I grew up in is thunder storming,  
making a racket of itself  
making the people turn in their sheets  
making the dogs howl.

I like it when nature is this angry.  
when she justifies me.  
When we become tormented twins  
and scream into the black night together.

I say: Remind me with another shot of lightning  
the repercussions  
of forsaking our beautiful.

I say: Remind me with another roll of thunder,  
how loud we can get  
when spoken over.

All this turned over metal,  
all these fallen trees,  
beneath the spread of her stomping feet  
under the breath of her flowing hair.

And how she downpours  
and how I cry along with her  
full of rage-filled regret.

Us, always underestimated  
until our destruction begins.  
Us, always proving we have force  
despite our soft springs.

But still the man will take from us,  
every new year,  
every new flower, every new fruit

and so we storm. To protect what is left  
and lament all that has been stolen.

We have come a long way from the time of the Brontë sisters, today many women authors are adored by their audiences and acclaimed by reviewers. But that does not mean all literature is now equal. Literature made from and for young women throughout history has been overlooked and neglected, chastised and unfairly criticized. It is no longer a world in which women are blatantly marked as too intellectually weak to make creative works. That being said, despite female written novels becoming best sellers and receiving prestigious honors, there is still discrimination happening towards women.

I feel that this active gender disparity has influenced the female author, J.K. Rowling to adopt gender ambiguous pronouns. Rowling is hailed as one of the best authors of present day. She is internationally acclaimed for her best-selling Harry Potter series, published between the years of 1997 and 2007. Her birth name is

Joanne Rowling yet she wrote under the gender ambiguous pen name, JK Rowling, for all of the Harry Potter Series. For her second series she wrote under a pseudonym as well, this one the masculine, militarized identity of Robert Galbraith. He is a fictionalized soldier and author that she fictionalized for ‘*The Cormoran Strike Series*’ in 2013.

Rowling has spoken publicly about why she published Harry Potter under the gender ambiguous initials of J.K. In an interview recorded below with J.K. Rowling and CNN interviewer Amanapour, the author admits that using an ambiguous pen name was not originally her plan, but the plan of her publishers.

The interview starts off with the usual pleasantries and book release topics, however, after Amanapour casually asks Rowling why she chose to publish under only her initials Rowling answers, saying: “oh, because my publisher, — who published Harry Potter, they said to me, we think this a book that will appeal to boys and girls. And I said, oh great.” Rowling then carries on to explain that her publisher asked her directly if she could disguise her feminine sounding name behind the gender ambiguous initials of J.K., revealing that her publishers did not think that boys would pick up a fantasy novel written by a female; that success for her novel would be more likely if she hid her gender identity. Rowling does not conceal this encounter. She even admits out loud to Amanapour during the interview “that basically they were trying to disguise my gender,” displaying that

she was aware of the gender discrimination she faced when trying to get the Harry Potter series published (CNN).

The idea that men and boys are dissuaded from fiction written by female authors strikes me as an archaic idea; one that mirrors the time of the Brontë sisters, before the active feminist movements. Today women have gained access to countless rights and equity victories. However, in the 21st century a female author's publisher is still worried about her gender limiting the success of her novel. This says a lot about the way in which gender dynamics are continually affecting authorship. It is shame that some male readers continue to be less inclined to read novels written by females. Culture has not shifted its mentality toward parity for all writers. Leaving writers like Rowling to choose between their profession and displaying a part of their identity.

Although Rowling shows she is aware of the gendered situation, she does not condemn the actions of her publisher, in fact she attempts to turn it into something positive. Rowling goes on to say: "I quite like J.K., I think I wouldn't have chosen it, and I wouldn't have chosen it for that reason either, but I was so grateful to be published if they told me to call myself Rupert, I probably would have done it to be honest with you" (CNN).

Rowling was a previously unpublished author and it is understandable that she was desperate to gain support for her book, but she has quite a cavalier

approach to being forced to change her name and disguise her gender identity in order to publish her work. She tries to make amends and say that she likes her pen name now. While that may be true she ignores the manipulation of forcing her to disconnect with her gender to make her series more marketable. By ignoring the gender politics behind choosing a male pen name, she also fails to acknowledge the stigmas other female authors face, perpetuating the problem of discrimination and the appeal of masculine pseudonyms.

The concealment of her identity did not last long, and Rowling has found literary success as a female writer, but this does not change the fact that her femaleness was seen as hindrance in the beginning of her career. Nonetheless, in 2013, when Rowling began publishing a new series entitled the '*The Cormoran Strike Series*' she did so under a masculine pseudonym. She wrote under the name of Robert Galbraith, once again concealing her gender identity. Rowling claims that she published under this this pseudonym secretly because she wanted to publish work without the attachment of her Harry Potter fame. Rowling explains that she chose to use a male pseudonym to "take my writing persona as far away as possible from me" (Guardian).

However, it is interesting that Rowling made the decision to construct such a masculine identity for herself while attempting to break into the genre of crime, because crime is a more overtly masculine and sometimes violent genre. Rowling



went to the extent of creating an entire CV for Robert Galbraith, which includes his time serving as a soldier. She interviewed her male friends and created a complete story for her pseudonym. This wouldn't be the first time a female author used a pseudonym to conceal their identity in a genre that had a tendency to be exclusive to men, Bradley Sheldon is a female science fiction writer who wrote under the alias of James Tiptree because she felt that "a male name seemed like good camouflage" (Howell). Tiptree's quote recognizes the concern of discrimination female authors face, instead of being prideful of her identity she felt she must hide it to fit into the homogeneity of the male dominated literary world.

As for Rowling, she does not mention gender in her decision to use the Robert Galbraith pen name. She says she created the pseudonym to "receive totally unvarnished feedback" (Guardian). Her thinking that revealing her identity would affect the way audiences interpret her novel makes sense, given her prior publishing experiences. However, through her *Harry Potter* series, JK Rowling has created a community of sorts, where she is adored for the wizarding world she has created. There are many fans who would purchase and love the series just because Rowling has written it, so publishing under an alias levels the playing field and allows Rowling receive real criticisms of her series. However, the intensely masculine portrayal of Robert Galbraith could be an element of her subconscious and her early experiences of publishing discrimination. The construction of

Galbraith appeals to a certain masculinized genre, one that female writers could find less success in.

Proof of the discrimination Rowling could have faced in the crime genre, her editor named David Shelley read the first book of the series as if Robert Galbraith had written it, completely unaware that it was in fact Rowling's work. His choice in comment after find out who had truly written the novel was "I never would have thought a woman wrote that" (Guardian). The article phrases this insult as a compliment. Rowling is even quoted to joke back with him, saying "I successfully channeled my inner bloke!" (Guardian).

Again, others as well as Rowling's own language around her pseudonyms make light of the consequences at hand: that discrimination surrounding women authors still exists. Their banter ignores the reality that some people in the publishing world do not believe women can produce the same type of literature as men. It also suggests that someone as gifted in writing as Rowling still has to deal with the complications of her gender affecting the way her work is viewed.

Women writing under a male sounding pseudonym shows that authorship is still a heavily male-dominated field. For some women, gender continues to disrupt the experience of publishing their creations. Women face exclusion and criticism in the literary field. Although 150 years has passed between the pseudonyms created by the Brontë sisters, for authors like Joanne Rowling many of the circumstances

and conditions remain the same. If women choose to write under pseudonyms that conceals their gender, they have the opportunity for more success in male-dominated genres and they avoid the gender discrimination that comes with their identity. The simple fact that women face this reality, along with the inequality of the female publishing percent found by VIDA, shows that gender parity has not been achieved in the literary world and that women continue to struggle between gender identity and professional literary success.

## II. **The Intent:**

My poetry compilation is a work that will inevitably be labeled as a creation for young women. There is girlish charm and antidote. A kind of violently soft growing. A firm swoon, a slight sway; a sad constant explaining of itself to the world surrounding.

This is a series of poems from a young woman herself. But I call to all readers, to not look at pink bubblegum, gender, and dismiss it. The devalued young woman is the most inherently wise of all us. It is we who maneuver a world that both patronizes and endangers us. It is we who learn how to be both pliable and rigid, to give just enough and take just enough to survive.

In the past, those identifying as female have written historically acclaimed novels behind masculine aliases. But here you will find no pseudonyms.

There will be no diluents for my perspective. Dare to ignore the young women born with half the continuation of our world inside them. Try to underestimate and you will be mistaken, like dancing with metal in a thunderstorm.

This work is a creation for everyone. We all have so much to learn from each other, and we have most to learn from the people we have the least in common with. But if only young girls read this, may it make your voices louder, louder until one day we are cascading our stories from every mountain top—for all to listen.

### III. **The Work:**

Below are the twenty-one poems I've written, divided into three separate sub-sections: Boys, Blood, and Bubblegum. **Note:** for publishing purposes the creative works of this paper have been excluded. Thank you for reading my research and hopefully one day my creative works will be published and available.

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