

Disruption – Not Always a Bad Thing

A Look at Scripts in Tamora Pierce's First Test

Katy Day

While disruption can often be portrayed in a negative light, script disruption is a powerful cognitive tool when it comes to combating gendered stereotypes. Script disruption has been shown to engage the brain, which makes readers more aware of what they are reading – and therefore they are more likely to remember it. Here I analyze Tamora Pierce's fantasy novel *First Test*, as it closely focalizes one female character who refuses to be hemmed in by what is expected of her gender. I hypothesize that books that depict empowered female characters, who are portrayed as such through disrupting scripts, offer implied adolescent readers' real-life coping strategies that they can transmute from page to reality.

Girl

What does that word mean? Sugar and spice and everything nice? The color pink? Someone emotional and submissive? While these descriptors may make you scoff, you would still probably not be surprised that this is the kind of answer given by girls in a 2009 survey. When Rachel Simmons, co-founder of the organization *Girls Leadership*, asked adolescent girls what they thought it meant to be a good girl, they came up with this list: quiet, perfect, sheltered, a follower, polite, generous, kind, respectful, flirtatious, average, a people pleaser, has no opinion on things, listens, speaks well, follows the rules, and does not get mad (2009, p. 2). These kinds of behaviors are inculcated in girls from an early age, and these attitudes stem from a multitude of sources: parents, teachers, television, movies, etc. They are processed by children and adolescents' still-developing brains and taken in as what it means to be a girl. It can become their blueprint for how to think and how to behave. It can become their stereotype.

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Stereotypes are not bad, in and of themselves. They are shortcuts for the brain that make it more efficient, and the brain is always trying to be efficient. Neuroscientists have shown two phases of major restructuring in the brain during a human's lifetime: a year or so after birth, and during puberty. At birth, humans have millions of synaptic connections; in what is believed to be an effort to make the brain more efficient, these synapses are pared down in the first years of life – the brain discovers which connections are not used and cuts them off (Blakemore and Choudhury, 2006, p. 207). The social brain, or the parts of the brain involved in understanding others, and how to behave around others, undergoes “structural development, including synaptic reorganization, during adolescence” (Blakemore, 2008, p. 267). It seems that it is trying to make itself more efficient, so certain connections are abandoned. Sarah-Jayne Blakemore and Suparna Choudhury state that “certain social cognitive skills might be much more difficult to incorporate into brain networks once they are established after puberty” (2006, p. 307). These certain skills may include the ability to see beyond the stereotypes.

What is a stereotype?

Stereotype is not actually the word I want to use. The word that is more accurate for this discussion is script. Scripts are a cognitive tool which are defined by pre-existing knowledge, which is naturally different and unique to every individual on the planet. But although it is based on an individual's personal knowledge, it is a sociocultural product. Peter Stockwell explains that the cognitive idea of a script is a mental protocol that is learned by humans to navigate social situations (2002, p. 77). He defines it as a conceptual structure drawn from memory to assist in understanding (2002, p. 77). A common example is dining in a restaurant. There is a script that tells us to look for various indicators to assess whether or not we wait for a hostess or we seat ourselves. If there is someone to seat us, we prepare an answer to the question, “How many?” We know to wait for menus, and that after a certain amount of time if they are not received, we know to look for a waiter.

When seen in this light, scripts seem like a fundamental aspect of social functionality. Prior knowledge of similar situations cuts down on the minutiae we need to pay attention to, as we already know how to react – efficiency in action. But this idea becomes complicated when combined with expected gender performativity and what people expect of different genders. Judith Butler states that gender is “real only to the extent that it is performed” (1990, p. 278). There are masculine behaviors and feminine behaviors that are associated with gender, and it is these actions that, when repeated, result in a gendered identity being solidified. But these repeated performances lead to a stereotypical idea of what gender is, hearkening back to the idea that being a girl means only one prescribed thing. Butler was attempting to get people to understand that identifying with one gender does not limit how a person can behave. Roberta Seelinger Trites elucidates,

saying that “cultural narratives enscript cognitive conceptualizations, entailing them in ways that prevent people from considering alternative cultural narratives” (2014, p. 96). Scripts can become unconscious stereotyping that limits not only what one thinks others are capable of, but can also limit what an individual thinks she can accomplish. Adolescent literature is an especially important milieu for script disruption because “so many scripts are based on stereotypical knowledge” (Trites, 2014, p. 49) – including gender stereotypes. Adolescents often internalize scripts and do not necessarily think about or question them if nothing forces them to, or something shows them that they *can* be questioned. The script must be interrupted.

What is script disruption?

A literary example of a script is when we see an old crone hand a young girl an apple. We expect that the girl will take a bite of it and fall ill because the apple is poisoned. We then expect the old crone to be revealed as the evil stepmother and for a handsome prince to save the girl. But if something a reader is not expecting occurs, it is more likely that the reader will begin to pay closer attention to the events of the story. If the young girl takes the poisoned apple and tricks the old crone into eating it, the script is turned on its head. This deviance from the norm is called script disruption. In narratives, when scripts are disrupted, readers are more likely to realize that something *different* is happening.

In this chapter, I analyze the character of Kel in *First Test*, the first book of Tamora Pierce’s quartet *Protector of the Small* (1999-2002). Aimed at adolescent readers, this quartet was the third Pierce wrote that is set in the realm of Tortall. While not a blockbuster hit in terms of popularity, Pierce’s Tortall books have a large and avid following, with readers commenting on how strongly these texts affected them (cf. Goodreads Tortall universe series). Kel starts the series as a ten-year-old who is the first girl to openly train as a knight of Tortall for the last century. She faces significant challenges from people who think that she is not capable of doing so, simply because she is female. What is important is how Kel deals with these gender-challenges: does she ignore them? Behave in a reactionary way? Become the type of person she thinks a female knight should be, as opposed to being herself? The most important aspect to examine will be how Kel does not let her behavior be dictated to her by the expectations of males. It is this portrayal of Kel’s behavior that is potentially most illuminating to implied readers, since it is a subtle script disruption that simultaneously suggests to readers that girls do not have to hem in their actions or expectations because of other people. I look for evidence of disruption of the traditional girl script and through that the showing of what I call the kick ass girl (who is not afraid to be girly or boyish and thinks you’re wrong for thinking in binary terms like that anyway) script. I briefly define these terms below before exploring them in my chosen texts.

The traditional girl script

I start with John Stephens' schematic idea of femininity, which are adjectives that describe the traditional girl – what she is like, how she behaves, who she *is*. The following are some of the words he uses to define traditional perceptions of femininity: non-violent, emotional, submissive, obedient/pleasing, caring, vulnerable, powerless, dependent, passive, intuitive (1996, p. 18-19). What is troubling is that Stephens' idea of femininity is not simply a definition bandied about in academic writing – several books and articles in the mainstream have been written on the idea that our culture thinks of girls in a very specific, subordinate way, as described earlier (cf. Simmons, 2009; Wardy, 2014). It is evident that many contemporary girls, when it comes to what the media is marketing to them, are being pushed towards traditional ideas of femininity. Not only that, but girls like this can think less of themselves, less of their gender, and that being a girl means certain things are not for them, whether that be a career as a scientist or speaking up against sexist treatment (APA, 2008).

Texts that show females behaving and thinking in ways other than what is represented by the traditional girl script can be enlightening to those who think their future is prescribed. Trites (2014) notes that scripts in adolescent literature are important because so few adolescents are aware of certain cultural phenomena, since they have been internalized and normalized in their cognition. Much as all scripts are simultaneously personal and societal, how one reacts to these scripts depends on one's life experience – or their reading experience. Readers with an awareness of gender scripts – even if a subconscious knowledge – are potentially more enabled to identify what society pushes as limiting, and to pursue their goals despite gender roles. Readers were found to create 'future memories' based on fiction they read – that is, they considered how they would behave in certain situations in the future, and found that they were influenced by fictive characters' behaviors (Heath & Wolf, 2012). Finding characters that adhere to the traditional girl script, or that are affected by it and react against it, can relate the fictive story to the real world – and show other ways in which to think and act. That is part of the reason why adolescent literature that disrupts gendered scripts can be so powerful.

The kick ass girl script

While I want to steer away from descriptive terms, the kick ass girl script is what I would call the ideal girl, because she has learned (or is learning) to act in accordance with her beliefs, desires and goals. She is not a model; she is herself. She does not conform to that which is expected of the traditional girl script, though that is not to say she cannot behave in that manner. Instead, she is aware (even if un-self-consciously) of gender scripts and ignores them and does not let them restrict her. She recognizes external representations of gender, and makes conscious decisions about how she wants to present herself, but for her *own reasons*. That is the important difference between

the kick-ass girl script and the traditional girl script. This particular script is fairly new in its validity *as* a script – a plethora of new publications with this kind of character have promoted the kick ass girl script (cf. *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* and *Graceling* to start with). This script describes a person who is fully herself, and makes decisions for herself. Her actions and behavior cannot be predicted by her gender, or the idea that she is purposefully *not* conforming to gender scripts. She is aware of gendered scripts of the traditional girl, but she strikes her own path, either manipulating the scripts to her benefit or bypassing them altogether.

What makes the kick ass girl script stand out is that it is empowering. When using the term empowerment, I mean a development of representation of a character from lack of agency/limited agency to a range of increased or full agency. I link this concept to Trites' concept of agency, wherein she states that a text works as a feminist children's novel if the protagonist is more aware at the end of the book of her ability to make her own choices and to assert her personality (1997, p. 6). I look at agency in terms of script disruption, because within the existing traditional girl script, female agency is limited. Through the disruption of that script, another is created: the kick ass girl script. The important difference between these two scripts is the first is predictable, while the second is less so. The unpredictability of the kick ass girl script comes in that it is attuned to each character who embodies it, and while a specific character may become predictable, it is impossible to quantify it as a whole – the definition of the kick ass girl script is that each girl makes decisions according to her own beliefs and desires. This unpredictability and evidence of varied choice could lead to the kick ass girl script being more cognitively engaging for readers.

Primary analysis: Keladry of Mindelan

In the following sections, I look at how Kel is depicted as performing – both when trying to be female and when trying to be not-female – and how she thinks about gender. I look to see if her actions oppose the ideas that certain kinds of gendered expressions are false while others are true, and I will identify them by her rejection of gender scripts.

Traditional girl?

There are very strict societal codes that govern the medieval fantasy realm of Tortall, especially when it comes to its aristocratic class. It is easy to associate it with what we know of medieval societies, because there are knights and princes, people riding horses and living in castles. It also has medieval ideas about women. At the age of ten, Kel decides she wants to train to become a knight, becoming the first girl to openly do so in over a century. Her depicted struggles, development, and behavior all work in conjunction with gendered scripts – sometimes conforming and sometimes disrupting.

Although legally girls can train now as knights, some of the same ideas about girls exist in characters' minds in Tortall as they do in our world: Lord Wyldon, the knight in charge of training the pages and squires, says, "Girls are fragile, more emotional, easier to frighten. They are not as strong in their arms and shoulders as men. They tire easily. This girl would get any warriors who serve with her killed on some dark night" (Pierce, 1999, p. 4). This description spells out precisely what the traditional girl script entails. Girls are weak and unskilled, and will never be as good as the boys. The norm of Tortall is for noble girls to go to convent schools and learn how to run their husbands' households. Right from the beginning of the book, the fictional world is set up to depict a world that promotes the traditional girl script as the *right* way for girls to behave.

That is, until Kel is introduced to readers. She "had no interest whatever in ladylike arts, and even less interest in the skills needed to attract a husband or manage a castle" (Pierce, 1999, p. 12). In saying this, Kel disrupts the traditional girl script, both within and without the story world. Kel has *chosen* to go down this path, an indication of her agency (Trites, 1997) – something she has in spite of the prevalent worldviews around her. She has not been coerced or frightened or manipulated in any obvious way. In fact, it is shown that "it had taken a great deal of persuasion for Kel to convince her mother that her quest for knighthood did not mean she wanted to settle for second best, knowing she would never marry" (Pierce, 1999, p. 12). It is difficult even for someone who supports Kel's desires to understand that they are her *true* desires – the script is so inculcated in the fabric of their world. Kel's choice to train as a knight disrupts the traditional girl script. She has shown that her desires do not dovetail with that of society at large, and that does not make them any less worthy or desirable. She rejects the traditional girl script, which both alerts readers that something *different* is happening and needs attention, and it is also something that readers may want to do in their own lives. It is almost as if Kel is a fictional role-model for real-life readers.

Even after Kel has successfully completed her first year, overcoming every challenge thrown at her and proving herself to be the most talented of all the pages, she must still deal with people who think she will switch to a scriptically-gendered life. Lord Wyldon tells her, "Soon your body will change. The things that you will want from life as a maiden will change... What if you fall in love? What if you come to grief, or cause others to do so, because your thoughts are on your heart and not combat?" (Pierce, 1999, p. 225). Despite the proof of Kel's skill and personal satisfaction, and her vehement protests that she wants no other life than this, she is questioned because she is a girl. She has disrupted the traditional girl script time and time again, but others expect the overarching script to be more powerful than her own desires. Statements like Lord Wyldon's convey the message that girls cannot know their own minds, and therefore cannot have control over their choices, which contradicts the idea that girls can have agency. And once again, Kel disrupts that script, for she refuses to give up her training, proving that she is more powerful than society's idea of what she *should* be.

Kick ass girl

As Kel disrupts the traditional girl script, she begins performing the kick ass girl script. But as this script is one of unpredictability, it serves as its own kind of disruption. As whenever anyone does something out of the norm, Kel is heavily scrutinized by those who do not understand her actions. This scrutiny begins before she even begins her training, since it is decided that she will undergo a probationary year before she will be admitted as a true page. She notes the unfairness of it when compared to the boys, as she is “supposed to be treated the same” (Pierce, 1999, p. 8), and no boy has ever been made to be a probationer. Instead, aware of the gender-biased attitudes and unfair probation foisted upon her, Kel makes the choice to be true to herself. The palace will not allow girls to be treated fairly, but she goes anyway, proving that any girl up to the challenge of training as a knight can do so openly, no matter what provisions are put up to blockade her. Kel is shown as being more aware of the social injustice of Tortall, and thus being more aware of the potential role she could play in proving that girls can be knights – and, on a larger scale, that girls should not be barred from anything because of their gender.

Early in the novel, Kel decides that she is going to wear dresses to dinner while she is training at the palace. This choice is different than what she originally prepared to do – that is, eat dinner while wearing trousers, and trying to call as little attention possible to the fact that she is a girl. If she had done this, she would almost be adhering to the traditional girl script, since she would be doing something *solely* to seem like she is not a traditional girl. Fortunately (though it is an unfortunate welcome to her new life), when Kel is taken to her rooms in the palace for the first time, she finds that someone has taken the time to trash it, ruining bedclothes, upturning furniture, and dumping her packs on the floor. Writing on the wall reads, “No Girls! Go Home! You Won’t Last!” (p. 31). Kel’s depicted thought process at seeing this mess is elucidating, for the reader is permitted to see how even Kel thought of herself almost as a type of boy. The text reads, “She’d thought that if she was to train as a boy, she ought to dress like one” (p. 32). Her plan had been to avoid any undue notice that performing outwardly as the traditional girl would have garnered (though it is obvious from the treatment her room received that it does not matter to the others how she dresses), and in that avoidance of attention she had hoped to present as a boy. Having read the words on her wall, however, indicates to her that it makes no difference what she looks like, how she behaves, or even how skilled she is at fighting; the people who did that to her room only care that she has the wrong genitalia.

After processing the damage that has been done, she makes the choice to *not* dress like a boy: “She was a girl; she had nothing to be ashamed of, and they had better learn that first thing. The best way to remind them was to dress at least part of the time as a girl” (p. 32). Kel is depicted as understanding gender performativity, and her change of stance from being a girl who will dress as a boy to being a girl who will dress as a girl

is not due to her wanting to embody the traditional girl script. Rather, she shows that she understands that a dress is a prop of the traditional girl script, and she manipulates it to her purpose. She warps the script to her own use. By showing her own awareness, it is possible that she will encourage readers to consider the gender related scripts that they encounter.

Why this is important

There is tangible evidence that readers *do* engage with fiction, and their brains are improved by it (Blackford, 2004; Fong, Mullin, & Mar, 2015; Heath & Wolf, 2012; Mar & Oatley, 2008). Knowing that this engagement happens, it is important to examine what books like *First Test* and characters like Kel accomplish when it comes to ideas such as gender norms and themes of empowerment, and what that could potentially mean for readers.

Reading adolescent feminist fantasy fiction alone will not empower readers; much more is involved than that. To further elucidate upon what I mean when I say empowerment, I look to Albert Bandura (1997), a sociocognitive psychologist who studies self-efficacy. He states that the term empowerment is misused by political groups and hype, which makes people think that it is a quantifiable thing that is bestowed upon people like a gift. Instead he defines it as that which is gained through developing a personal efficacy that *enables* people to make use of opportunities and break through environmental and social constraints. He says that most important is the idea of enablement, and that is what enhances agency. Vital for this process is “equipping people with a firm belief that they can produced valued effects...and providing them with the means to do so” (1997, p. 477). Books like *First Test* are part of an enabling process, something that can be achieved through the cognitive and affective challenges posed to readers through processes such as script disruption.

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