How Fantasy Speaks to Adolescent Readers: The Development of Gender Equity, Heroism and Imperfection, and Good and Evil from an Exploration into Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* and *Heroes of Olympus* Series

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Many genres of fictional novels are considered groundbreaking for complex plots and psychologically interesting characters. Little attention has been focused on how fantasy can be groundbreaking. This exploratory case study centers on how the five-novel series Percy Jackson & the Olympians, *and its five-part sequel* The Heroes of Olympus, *speaks to a reading community of eighth grade female adolescent readers. This study traces the development of social inquiries of gender inequality, heroism and imperfection, and good and evil from these readers' interactions with characters and events in the world of Percy Jackson.*

> *Reading will make you smarter but I don't know if it works with fantasy.... Usually the books I read is so out of the way that you wouldn't see everyday people battling gigantic worms or something like that.*

Made by an eighth grader and an aspiring fantasy author, this statement reflects an overall societal conception that fantasy novels have little to offer readers. Even though fantasy is a widely popular genre, especially with series such as *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954) and *Game of Thrones* (Martin, 1996), many readers do not consider these books groundbreaking or life altering. As a result, fantasy is a genre underrepresented in adolescent English classrooms. This study investigates the groundbreaking nature of fantasy by documenting the social and emotional consequences of

eighth grade readers as they discussed their favorite series from Rick Riordan *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* and its sequel *Heroes of Olympus* series.

A key defining characteristic of fantasy is that it contains an unnatural or impossible element, something could not happen in the real world (Doughty, 2013). Characteristic elements may involve the use of magic or the supernatural, time shifts, talking animals, the hero's quest, and the battle between good and evil (Doughty, 2013; Kurkjian, Livingston, Young, & Avi, 2006; Sandner 2004; Timmerman, 1983; Thomas, 2019). Fictional novels characterized as fantasy are widely varied. High fantasies, such as *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954), may be set in completely different worlds and/or contain many of these elements that separate it from reality (Doughty, 2013). Utopian or dystopian fiction, such as *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), are set in worlds that are "unreachable" (Doughty, 2013, p. 15) in which authors explore social or political structures that may or may not agree with an author's philosophical or moral stance. Intrusion fantasies, such as Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* and its sequel *Heroes of Olympus* series, bear a great deal of similarity to real life in which the fantastical elements "intrude into a recognizable and realistic fictional world" (Doughty, 2013, p. 17). This estrangement nature of fantasy leads to the assumption that fantasy is purely escapism: "fantastic literature importantly reveals itself to be only that much more bound in place" (Sandner, 2004, p. 4). Due to readers' full immersion into these unrealistic worlds, they may receive unconventional experiences that they have no real-life reference for (Branhan, 1983). This leads to the assumption that fantasy does not contain important messages for its readers.

Yet proponents of fantasy claim that fantasy can explore real-life social, political, personal, and spiritual issues (Branhan, 1983; Doughty, 2013; Kurkjian et al., 2006; Sandner, 2004; Timmerman, 1983). "Fantasy is never content with objective testimony to pragmatic reality; instead it explores the world of humankind in its spiritual reality...it is meant to be read first with the heart" (Timmerman, 1983, p. 3). Fantasies allow readers to consider central and realistic themes in a way that can be more palatable than realistic fiction (Kurkjian et al., 2006; Thomas, 2019). Characters within fantasy "confront the same terrors, choices, and dilemmas we confront in our world" (Timmerman, 1983, p. 49). Thus, by immersing oneself in the fantasy world, readers gain experiences that can be used in their own social worlds: "We leave the road of life for a time not to lose the road, but to find the road more certain" (Timmerman, 1983, p. 50). Fantasy has the potential to leave an emotional and cognitive impact on readers, especially on adolescent readers who are

beginning to form and build their perceptions of themselves, others, and their social worlds. Readers have the potential to become empowered within fantastical worlds that can be elusive within their real worlds (Thomas, 2019).

This exploratory study investigated how fantasy had an emotional, moral, and cognitive impact on eight female adolescent readers as they met to discuss their favorite series *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* and the sequel *Heroes of Olympus* series. To determine impact on the girls, this study traced the development of societal issues of gender equality, heroism and imperfection, and good and evil from readers' intimate transactions with their favorite Percy Jackson characters to the application to real-life scenarios.

THE NEED FOR PERCY JACKSON
IN THE ADOLESCENT ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Research has described how the practice of adolescent literature circles or book clubs could have a significant impact on the emotional and cognitive development of adolescent readers (Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995; Greene, 2016; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Noll, 1994; Park, 2012; Polleck, 2010; Smith, 2000; Taber, Woloshyn, & Lane, 2013). This research has documented how adolescents connect to characters comparing their own ideas and actions with those of the character (Greene, 2016; Polleck, 2010; Smith, 2000). Adolescents also developed sophisticated insights on themselves, such as what it means to be a black female adolescent, how to handle emotions such as grieving, how to handle relationships, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating solutions to conflict, and seeking help when needed (Greene, 2016; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Park, 2012; Polleck, 2010). Discussions about young adult literature have also allowed students to explore societal issues such as gender inequality, disruptions of society's representation of black girlhood, aging, sexual and domestic abuse, war, censorship (Goatley et al., 1995; Greene, 2016; Ivey & Johnston, 2013, Noll, 1994; Smith, 2000; Taber et al., 2013). Oftentimes children are encouraged to move beyond the confines of the book by reading additional resources or venturing out into the community to answer their most pressing questions developed by the book group. For example in Noll (1994) students interviewed staff and patients at a nursing home to learn more about difficult problems faced by the elderly. Yet, with the exception of Taber et al. (2013) who explored gender inequality and female empowerment in her book club around *The Hunger Games,* book club and literature circle research has largely focused on realistic fiction in which stories could actually occur in a believable setting.

Very few of these studies have used young adult fantasy, specifically bestselling fantasy fiction such as *Percy Jackson & the Olympians,* as a source for critical analytical discussion.

The position that some genres of young adult fiction has the potential to be more socially, emotionally, and cognitively beneficial for adolescent readers than other genres of fiction has support within the literary field. Tim Parks, in an essay that appeared in the blog of *The New York Review of Books* (n.d.)*,* refutes the prevailing perspective that "reading anything is better than nothing." For Parks, bestsellers, prevents engagement with further works of fiction. Parks claims that such fiction is "constantly repeating the same gratifying formula...stimulates and satisfies a craving for endless sameness," in which readers are encouraged to stay within their comfort zones rather than engaging in "more strenuous attempts to engage with the world in new ways." Rick Riordan's bestselling series *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* and *Heroes of Olympus* would be considered under Parks' description of low-quality fiction as it has been criticized in popular media outlets, such as newspaper columns and Reddit forums for having juvenile characters and similar plots with every additional novel (Mead, 2014; u/mail123, 2017).

This position that certain kinds of fictional genres were more likely to promote increases in socio-emotional development in readers also has support from psychological experimental studies. Kidd and Castano (2013, 2017) predicted that literary fiction, a genre they identified as more focused on aesthetic qualities and rounded characters, might have a greater capacity to unsettle readers and challenge their thinking, in comparison to what they identified as genre-fiction or bestsellers, which had a focus on formulaic plots with stereotyped characters engaged in predictable actions. The researchers predicted that literary fiction was "more psychologically interesting and thus have greater artistic achievements" (2017, p. 473), and that these rounded characters prompted readers "to make, adjust and consider multiple interpretations of character's mental states" (2017, p. 483). Kidd and Castano (2013) asked participants to read short passages from selected literary works of fiction by award winning or canonical writers and passages from recent bestsellers. Next, the participants completed measures that assessed their abilities to infer and understand the thoughts and feelings of others by having participants look at pictures of eyes and faces and having them accurately identify emotions. In their updated study (Kidd & Castano, 2017), the researchers controlled for the effects of empathy through self-reports (as readers who were more empathetic, were more likely to read fiction and perform well on the measures), and publication dates (genre authors have published their works more recently than literary authors, meaning that literary authors are least likely to be read).

Results from both studies revealed that reading literary fiction enhanced participants' ability to identify emotions and infer character's thoughts and emotions as compared to genre-fiction.

Fong, Mullin, and Mar (2013) also supported Kidd and Castano's theory that particular genres may promote a greater capacity to understand other's thoughts and emotions. Using the same measures as the Kidd and Castano (2013) study, Fong et al. (2013) investigated whether long-term exposure to specific genres of romance, suspense/thrillers, science fiction and fantasy, and domestic fiction may be related to the differences of participants' ability to understand the thoughts and emotions of others. Their results concluded that romance was the genre that most predicted this ability because "the plot, goals, and characters in the narrative might primarily be driven by the navigation and resolution of interpersonal interactions and relationships" (p. 11). While participants with lifetime exposure to science fiction and fantasy tended to be more introverted.

Thus, research from Kidd and Castano (2013, 2017) and Fong et al. (2013) supports Parks' position that certain forms of fiction, such as literary fiction or romance, can be considered groundbreaking and can have an enduring impact on readers. These genres have "rounded" characters, evoke profound emotional experiences in readers, and involve inter-personal relationships. While bestsellers, such as *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* and *Heroes of Olympus* series, with its predictable plots and one-dimensional characters, could be considered by adults to have less of an impact on readers. It is important to note, however, that these studies did not explain *how* these genres promoted a greater ability to infer the thoughts and feelings of others. These researchers were also careful to note that different types of fiction may foster different types of social and cognition processes that were not accounted for in these studies. They speculated that bestsellers, with its stereotypical characters, might also be beneficial to the social and emotional development of readers as it could boost strategies of social perception, drawing readers to the "idiosyncratic, subjective experiences of others" (Kidd & Castano, 2017, p. 483). Thus, more research is needed in investigating the positive benefits of lifelong readers of best-selling fiction, particularly bestselling fantasy fiction. How do best-selling series such as *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* series and *Heroes of Olympus* speak to contemporary readers? How can works of fantasy help adolescent readers understand or point to issues that confound us today? This study will reveal what makes the world of Percy Jackson groundbreaking to a reading community of eighth grade adolescent girls. It will describe how these girls used their engagement with their favorite world to think deeply about real-life moral, spiritual, and societal constructs.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

This case study was focused on one community of eighth grade girls, ages 13-14, from a middle school in the Northeastern United States. Most of the school's 600 plus students were Caucasian (76% of student population) and of middle socioeconomic advantage. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the sample was small, non-random, purposeful, and criterion-based. Only girls were chosen in this investigation to eliminate the possible roadblocks of mixed gendered groups. Evans (2002) and Evans, Anders, and Alvermann (1998) noted in their investigations of fifth grade text discussion groups various power dynamics and an "us versus them mentality" between boys and girls when the book discussions consisted of mixed gendered groups. Such dynamics either lead to a silencing of voice or a battle for dominance that resulted in little productive conversations. Thus, the intention in choosing only girls for this study was to help the participants feel more comfortable with me (also a female) and to contribute and explore issues that mattered most. Avid or proficient readers were chosen because of their engagement with young adult fiction. These readers were more likely to be willing to share their experiences with texts because they felt confident as readers.

Participants were chosen based on the recommendation of their English Language Arts teachers. Each teacher selected five students and these students were invited to attend a recruitment session. Out of 20 students, seven students chose to participate. The participants, Athena, Aviaei, Cassidy, Cookie, Jess, Katie, Liz, and Veronica chose their own pseudonyms from their favorite characters in stories. Veronica declined participation midway through the study because of other commitments vying for her time. Athena, Aviaei, Cassidy, Veronica, and Liz were Caucasian and Katie and Jess were of Asian heritage. All of these girls were native English speakers.

These sessions were conducted in the reading resource room in which the participants had access to a wide selection of young adult novels of multiple genres in which many of these books were pre-release copies. They were allowed to borrow the novels anytime they wished as an additional benefit of participation. These sessions occurred during their lunch period. There were 20 group sessions in total. After the girls had gotten their lunches, they had a total of 30 minutes to engage in conversation.

THE DESIGN OF THE READING COMMUNITY

This study was based on a larger exploratory study investigating the processes and progress of this community of eighth grade adolescent female readers as they discussed their transactions with narrative fiction and, in-turn, built new understandings of the self, others, and their social worlds (Smit, 2015). Initially, the readers discussed memorable narrative reading experiences from multiple genres of young adult fiction novels that led to new conceptual understandings. These conversations generated a list of potential social inquiries (e.g. good and evil, gender equality, perfection) for the girls to explore in-depth. The next series of conversations, the girls chose an inquiry to develop in-depth. They used their experiences, interacting with characters in multiple fictional texts as a foundation for discussing these inquiries. The discussions involving a particular inquiry generally lasted for four sessions. When the girls decided that they explored an inquiry thoroughly, they would pick another inquiry from the list. The last two discussion sessions were held for end-of-study group reflection. In this space, the girls identified their perceptions of the community, revealed what they learned about themselves, others, and their social world, and recalled what had transferred to their personal reading and writing practices.

While the girls had mentioned experiences with other genres such as romance (*Eleanor & Park,* Rowell, 2013), realistic fiction (*Chancey of the Maury River,* Amateau, 2011), historical fiction (*Ingenue: The Flappers,* Larkin, 2012), and assigned texts (*The Outsiders,* Hinton, 1967), it was fantasy that they claimed was their favorite genre. In particular, the world of Percy Jackson was the series the girls had talked about the most. As requested by the girls, two of our sessions were focused solely on their experiences interacting with the main characters in the series. The girls also frequently referenced this series as they were developing their inquiries into gender equality, heroism and imperfection, and good and evil. The girls had mentioned that they read the first series *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* and were currently reading *The Heroes of Olympus* series. Thus this qualitative exploratory study focuses exclusively on their references to the world of Percy Jackson. Their love for the relatable characters within the Percy Jackson world prompted this closer examination into its groundbreaking nature for these girls.

THE WORLD OF PERCY JACKSON

Percy Jackson & the Olympians and the following sequel *Heroes of Olympus*, created by Rick Riordan, is a series of ten novels focused on the adventures of teenage demigods (half-human and

half-Greek and -Roman gods). The appeal of this series is how Greek and Roman mythology becomes a part of everyday life. While these characters have specific heroic powers due to their god-like ancestry, they also behaved like modern day teenagers who get into trouble and fall in love: "They rise to the occasion when needed, but with a fragility and self-doubt that is usually apparent for children of this age" (Publication Order of Heroes of Olympus Books, n.d.). These blended mythological and modern-day worlds created by Rick Riordan have been widely popular since 2005 after the release of *The Lightning Thief* (the first novel in *Percy Jackson & the Olympians*). This series as well as *The Kane Chronicles* (a separate trilogy focused on Egyptian mythology) has been translated into 42 languages and sold over 30 million copies in the U.S. alone (Wikipedia on Rick Riordan). Additionally, the series *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* and *Heroes of Olympus* has also produced ten related books by Rick Riordan and other authors. This includes illustrated guides to the world of Percy Jackson, coloring books, interactive e-books, eight graphic novels, and two American Feature Films (Rick Riordan, Wikipedia, n.d.). Beloved by fans all over the world, this fantasy world has generated a multitude of fan fiction narratives, 76.2 thousand narratives on fanfiction.net alone as of August of 2019 (fanfiction.net). Due to this popularity of the series, there is need for research to study how this fantasy world speaks to contemporary readers.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data sources included transcripts from discussion sessions. For this study, I examined through interactional analysis the "details of social interactions" (Jordan & Henderson, 1995, p. 41) between the girls as they connected with the relatable characters of Percy, Jason, Annabeth, Leo, and Luke, and how they wrestled with their assumptions or expectations on real-life societal issues. Jordan and Henderson (1995) note that the basic underlying assumption of interactional analysis is that knowledge is situated in the interactions among community members engaged in their world. Thus, I began my analysis by identifying "units of coherent interaction" or "ethnographic chunks" (Jordan & Henderson, 1995, p. 57) within discussions. These ethnographic chunks were identified as discussions about memorable reading experiences, characteristics of narrative fiction, and the development of social inquiries of good versus evil, imperfection and heroism, and gender inequality. Then I noted the shape of the event, "its high low points, the relaxed and frenzied segments, and the temporal ordering of talk" (Jordan & Henderson, 1995, p.61). I specifically noted when references from the world of Percy Jackson were inserted into the larger ethnographic chunks

and how they framed these ethnographic chunks as the girls transitioned from talk concerning character actions to talk concerning real life concerns.

LIMITATIONS

This study is limited in that it consisted of a small community of middle class, eighth grade, female, avid readers. A different composition of students would have chosen a different series of novels to focus on, thereby producing different social inquiries to pursue and generate a different set of understandings. The girls did note in their reflections of the community that if we had added boys their age to the discussion that they would have provided a unique perspective. "You have to have outspoken guys that compensate for the outspoken girls" (Liz). Yet, the girls also realized that if boys were added, that some of the girls would not have participated as much. The inclusion of mixed-gender group may have added a unique perspective, but it would have limited participation of other members. In addition, illnesses, holidays, shortened lunch periods due to school events and standardized testing, created large gaps of time between our sustained conversations. Had our discussion sessions been more consistent in its routine, our social inquiries may have evolved into different forms. These gaps in time gave the girls opportunity to think deeply about the social inquiries and change the trajectory of its development.

RESULTS

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS ON THE WORLD OF PERCY JACKSON

These eighth grade readers described the world of Percy Jackson as an "escape from reality" (Jess). Aviaei talked about how the series had a rejuvenating quality: "It lets my imagination flow...it definitely is a great stress reliever, I'll just be reading for hours and hours." Athena talked about her cravings for the "Percy Jackson experience." She mentioned how she purposefully prolonged finishing *The Mark of Athena* because she wanted to stay in the experience for longer. At the time of this conversation, *The Mark of Athena* was the latest installment of the *Heroes of Olympus* series.

> Athena: I am so excited about reading *Mark of Athena* but everyone is telling me that the
> bad parts are coming!
> Cassidy: You have to keep reading, you have to!
> Athena: I want to like stretch it out until next fall!
> Cassidy: Don't stretch it out just read it

Athena: Ok. I'm scared because Cookie said that when she read the ending, she threw the book across the room and then picked it up one more time to just read it again.

Cassidy: It's horrible but if you read it slowly it makes it even worse.

Liz: Just tear the Band-Aid off!

Jess: That's a good metaphor!

Liz: Instead of just going really really really slow.

Jess: I don't want a scab.

Athena: I just want to keep going until next fall because that's when the *House of Hades* is coming out and I am so excited! (Smit, 2019)

Soon after, Athena shared how she screamed and threw the book across the room because the ending "stabbed her in the heart" (Smit, 2019). She mentioned how her father had to come in to see if she was okay. This conversation also illustrates how endings can be joyfully frustrating, leaving the reader with wanting to find out what happens next. Readers look for other venues where they can keep themselves in their favorite worlds as they wait for the next installment of a series (Smit, 2019). In this case, Athena mentioned how she would watch YouTube videos to keep her within the world of Percy Jackson.

The world of Percy Jackson encouraged these avid readers to want to know more about Greek and Roman mythology. Aviaei stated: "Even in the Percy Jackson books – it's fantasy, but you learn Greek Mythology, and even in his other series you learn Egyptian mythology and stuff, so you get something out of it." Yet what these girls most enjoyed from experiencing the world of Percy Jackson was the relatable characters and the complex relationships. According to Athena, "They [the characters] are everything that I want to be in a person." In the series, *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* the readers loved the main character Percy Jackson, son of Poseidon, but it was Annabeth, the daughter of Athena, goddess of wisdom, who the girls connected with the most. This was especially true for Athena who explained her connection: "I am very sensitive about, 'Oh she's just a dumb blonde, she's weak' ... I like the fact that in Percy Jackson we have Annabeth who is a tough blonde. I like it when books reset the stereotype." This connection to Annabeth was evident when they discussed their dislike for the movie *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (Columbus, 2010). In the movie, Annabeth was a brown-haired person rather than a blonde-haired person. Since Annabeth was a champion against the stereotype that blonde-haired people are dumb, these readers were disappointed when the movie neglected this very important detail from the book.

These avid readers realized that the book series set up expectations that the movies should have fulfilled but did not.

The girls enjoyed the relationship between Percy and Annabeth. They talked about how their relationship was contentious at first. Athena recounted:

> Percy and Annabeth didn't get along in the beginning. Percy passed out and Annabeth was kind of caring for him, even though she didn't know him, and the first thing she said to him when he woke up was "you drool when you sleep."

The girls then mentioned how Annabeth and Percy fell in love later in the series. Athena claimed that fate allowed Annabeth to fall in love with Percy after her nasty breakup with Luke. She explained it by comparing their story with that of Anakin and Padme from the Star Wars movies (Lucas, 1977-2005):

> Athena: Do you know how the emperor manipulated Anakin? Well, I think Anakin is kind of like Luke from Percy Jackson. Kronos is just like the emperor from Star Wars. It just seems very connected in a way for me. Luke loved Annabeth, it was obvious, and he got manipulated by Kronos so Annabeth didn't like him anymore after that. However, in Padme's case, she died after her breakup because she had no reason to keep on living after Anakin was gone.
>
> Aviaei: She also had two children.
>
> Athena: Yeah I know, right? But, she died. In Annabeth's case, she was young enough that she still had hope that she could still find somebody and that somebody was Percy.

The Heroes of Olympus sequel series introduced additional characters: Jason (son of Jupiter), Piper (daughter of Venus), Leo (son of Hephaestus), Frank (son of Aries), and Hazel (daughter of Pluto). This allowed for more complex relationships and thus more in-depth discussions by these girls. Jason brought forth mixed emotions in the girls. The readers did not like Jason because he was a "copycat" (Cassidy) of Percy. According to the girls, both Percy and Jason have "alpha-male personalities" (Cassidy). In fact, they did not enjoy the first novel, *The Lost Hero,* as much as they enjoyed the previous series, because of the similarities in personality between Jason and Percy. They thought the novel was "a Percy Jackson book without Percy Jackson" (Aviaei). Yet, in subsequent novels, when the author eventually introduced Percy to Jason, they enjoyed how Percy and Jason's similar personalities clashed. For example, Athena mentioned one scene in which she loved how Percy and Jason were trying to "sit at the head of the table and Annabeth pushed them

both out of the way." Athena believed that both of them needed to feel like they were the center of attention "whenever one saves the day, the other one feels unwanted and unneeded." The girls also mentioned how they disliked Frank, a new character to the series, because he was the son of Aries. In the previous series, Aries was an antagonist to Percy. They were also annoyed with Hazel who was a "drama queen" (Cassidy) and had many instances of crying and hysteria. Yet, they loved Leo who they described as the "seventh wheel" (Cassidy) or the "odd one out." They felt bad for him because he "is always fighting Frank over Hazel" (Athena). Jess described Leo as "the pint of humor to lighten our hearts."

The romantic relationships between the seven main characters of Percy, Annabeth, Frank, Leo, Jason, Hazel, and Piper was a topic of many conversations. In addition to analyzing the relationship between Percy and Annabeth, they argued for how Piper and Jason were perfect for each other, yet, their relationship was based on a lie told by Hera (the Greek goddess of marriage and family). This discussion led to the girls imagining other possible additional matchmaking possibilities such as whether Reyna (daughter of the Roman God Bellona) should be in a romantic relationship with Jason or Leo.

HOW PERCY JACKSON INFLUENCED THE GIRLS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF SOCIAL ISSUES

The following will illuminate how these discussions about character behaviors and relationships between characters became the foundation for social inquiries of gender equality, perfection and heroism, and good and evil. Extensions of these inquiries to real-life scenarios demonstrated the relevance of this fantasy world in addressing issues that mattered to adolescents.

Social inquiry into gender equality: balance and strength. The girls used the world of Percy Jackson to reveal their understanding of gender equality as "balance." The girls talked about "balance" within their conversation about "genderless" books.

Aviaei: What about Percy Jackson?

Katie: That's a genderless book.

Jess: Because it has Annabeth in it.

Julie: So what is a genderless book?

Katie: A book that everyone can read no matter what gender they are.

Jess: A book with girls and guys, action and romance.

Aviaei: It's something that everyone [readers] agrees on.

Genderless is defined as a book in which the author chooses not to divulge the gender of a particular character (Gender Protagonists; Nielsen, 2012). However, these girls appropriated the term to mean a balance of male and female characters. Katie mentioned, "there has to be a balance of girl and guy characters."

In further conversations, balance intertwined with the concept of strength. The girls considered Annabeth to be a representative of a strong female character: "Annabeth can do anything better than a boy" (Cassidy). Yet, they believed in balance in that both Percy and Annabeth had their strong moments and weak moments. Specifically, they noted how the author, Rick Riordan, would change the portrayal of characters as being weak depending on which character's perspective he was writing. According to Aviaei:

> I think it depends on the perspective. If it [the perspective] was in Annabeth's point of
> view, then Percy would be an overall weak character, which he really isn't, and you would
> find Annabeth to be the stronger character. However, if it were in Percy's point of view,
> then you would be able to see the weaknesses and struggles she's going through.

The girls understood that narrative fiction writers portray certain perspectives and can leave other perspectives out. Through their experiences with Annabeth and Percy, the girls understood that they might not have access to the actions and intentions of characters because of how the author limits understanding.

The girls discussed strength in terms of the character's superpowers in which they used to save each other from perilous situations. They enjoyed the balance of how the male and female characters saved each other. Athena expressed: "Sometimes there is the girl in distress like in *The Titan's Curse* where Annabeth gets captured and Percy has to go save her, but that was a switch from normal, because it's usually Annabeth is saving his butt all the time." They also talked about a decision of Rick Riordan's to have a male that needed saving in *The Mark of Athena*. According to Athena, "Nico gets captured by the giants, and so I think that Rick Riordan, he did that on purpose to show the damsel in distress kind of thing where the women are always helpless. This time, he chose a boy, and a strong boy too, that needed saving."

The girls also discussed how these characters emotionally saved each other. Athena mentioned that, "Percy had moments all the time. When Percy was having those weak moments she

pulled him up and then when Annabeth was having those weak moments Percy pulled her up" (Smit, 2019).

In their interactions with characters, they imagined possible selves (Smit, 2019). These girls envisioned themselves as strong females who could stand up for "weaker" people. According to Liz: "All girls look for that. We look for someone strong to have when we are going through weak moment, but when we are having a strong moment we don't mind saving someone." Cassidy mentioned how she wanted to be a person that "Doesn't torment them [victims] and who will stick up for them, even though you aren't friends with them, they can see that maybe there's hope that I'm not going to be that kid that everyone picks on for the rest of my life" (Smit, 2019).

These conversations led the girls to challenge traditional male-dominated discourses portraying women as the weaker sex. They provided arguments such as women have strength because they outnumber men in population: "We are half the majority of the world's population, 51%" (Veronica). They also talked about how women are strong because they "take more pain, Mythbusters proved it...they took people and stuck their arms in buckets of water [to see which gender can withstand it longer]" (Cassidy). According to Athena:

> Yeah, really we are the strongest because think of olden times when they had the corsets, where they tied each other...no wonder they were considered the weaker sex they couldn't breathe! I mean seriously they are sitting there, and they are basically dying, and then they pass out and everyone is like, "oh she's weak."

The girls continued this line of thinking as they provided theories to explain why women have been portrayed as submissive in various cultures throughout history. Jess referred to Adam and Eve as being the first instance of when a woman submitted to a man. Aviaei mentioned how "Women have been told that they are supposed to be seen and not heard...because they understand more and men are like blah blah blah!" Yet, within these discussions, these readers, also provided counter narratives of how in Native American cultures it was the mother who made the important decisions in the family. Jess supported this argument by stating:

> Mulan, in the army she was considered equal and was treated the same as every male but then when she went back and stopped dressing up like a male at the end, then everyone was like, "You're just a women, remember, you can't do anything, blah blah blah." But, when she ended up saving China everyone respected her. You know not everyone can save China! Women are judged!

In these conversations, the girls banded together around what they saw were injustices facing women currently and throughout history. These arguments resulted in empowering themselves and (re)discovering their identities as strong women.

However, these readers went back to their concept of balance. The girls also advocated for males as females continue to empower themselves. Liz explained it in this way: "As roles of women have increased we also have to be focusing on guys too. I think that if guys focus more on women and women focus more on guys we would be more equal." They imagined a type of male, or the "dork" who "doesn't have as many chances to succeed because no one ever gives them the chance" (Cassidy). Their final understanding of gender equality was summarized by Jess: "So guys all have problems too, not just women. A lot of guys suffer from the same problems women do. So it balances out and it's not just women that like suffer."

SOCIAL INQUIRY INTO HEROISM AND IMPERFECTION

The girls loved imperfect characters and believed that no books are perfect, exactly what you imagined...except if you write it yourself" (Athena). The girls supported this statement with the following dialogue:

> Liz: I have something to say. The question right there is what's wrong with a character being perfect and that's exactly it.
>
> Athena: Nothing
>
> Liz: People aren't perfect. Characters in books can't be perfect.
>
> Athena: Nobody's perfect [sings]
>
> Liz: Because then you can't relate to them. So like a character being too perfect--that's what's wrong
>
> ...
>
> Katie: I think that if they were perfect there would be no story line there wouldn't be a book at all. Every character has to have a problem.

The readers especially loved the imperfect characters in the world of Percy Jackson: "Every character has something that if you combined them they would be the perfect person, but separate they all have their flaws" (Cassidy). Specifically, Athena mentioned Percy's fatal flaw was that he "loves his friends too much" because in *The Mark of Athena* he jumped over the cliff into Tartarus to save Annabeth without consideration for his own safety, "even though he didn't know at the time

that he could fly." Cassidy added that all the characters share one particular flaw: "Jealousy of their friends and their relationships with each other." For example, according to the girls, Leo is jealous "of everyone that is in love with each other" (Aviaei), and Piper is jealous of Reyna because for the possible threat to Piper's relationship with Jason.

Yet, according to the girls, it was not their divine powers that made these demigods heroic, but their human flaws or imperfections. Athena's example of Percy jumping into the pit of Tartarus to save Annabeth was heroic because, "He just did it. He didn't rely on his super powers" (Athena). In discussing a major action scene in *The Heroes of Olympus* series, in which the God Kronos assembled a big army to do battle, the girls mentioned how the full-fledged Gods had also major flaws in their character. Yet, they agreed that the demigods, or main characters in the world of Percy Jackson, were more heroic because their human side allowed them to change and grow. Unlike the full-fledge Greek and Roman gods who "have been that way, like, forever, and they just don't change – they can't learn from their mistakes" (Athena). Demigods, however, can learn from their mistakes and are "the perfect combination without being perfect" (Cassidy). This discussion led to a comparison between superheroes and normal people; imperfections allowed for "regular people to be courageous because they take risks in order to save others" (Jess) as opposed to superheroes that rely on their superpowers to save them.

When asked whether average people should work towards being perfect, the girls had different perspectives. Liz thought that people should work towards perfection "because what else are we going to strive for, being terrible?" The other girls did not like the idea of striving for perfection. Instead, they preferred the idea of bettering one's self. Jess stated, "People may be happy with the way they are but their goal is to be become the best they can possibly be." The girls stated that if a person is not happy with their life they can identify what needs to be changed and find a way to change it; this way, Cassidy said, "We strive to be better."

In particular, this conversation about heroism and perfection had an impact on Aviaei, the fantasy writer. She reflected about how her understandings about perfection helped her to develop her own characters:

> When I was writing my book and revising it over the past month, our perfection
> conversation made me take some things into consideration...It made me rethink my
> characters. I had to create my main character realistic enough but only enough, so she

would seem like on a higher level. She is naturally powerful, but I don't want her to be divine. This conversation helped me regulate while I was revising through my story.

SOCIAL INQUIRY INTO GOOD AND EVIL AS A CHOICE

In discussing character actions, behaviors, and decisions from the world of Percy Jackson, the girls confirmed the need for villains in stories: "A key point is to have a bad guy in the story. You have to have a villain in order to have the storyline keep on going" (Aviaei). Thomas (2019) described the purpose of the traditional villain or monster is to disturb, to unsettle or to cause unrest. Rarely are readers exposed to the villain's point of view and the motives of the monster are always a mystery. Aviaei confirms this traditional line of thinking by listing criteria needed for identifying a villain:

> Usually when you can pinpoint a villain is when they don't explain their motives, and you don't see it in their point of view. You only know that their motives are only against the main character's motives. The villain will often be doing something against the rules of normal society... the easiest way to pinpoint a villain is when they are trying to take over the world.

The girls followed this line of thinking with discussions of their favorite antagonists Kronos (the king of the Titans) and Luke (son of Hermes). While the girls believed that Kronos was truly villainous, they empathized with Luke. They believed he was unfairly labeled as a villain and was a victim of circumstance:

> Cassidy: I'm thinking Luke from Percy Jackson; he didn't have his dad growing up and his mom was crazy, so he was alone. He didn't have anybody to show him around. He blamed everyone for his life...
>
> Athena: This was before Kronos came around and Kronos saw that weakness and he grabbed it.
>
> Cassidy: And his [Kronos'] influence is what made Luke bad. I think that is true for everyone, if you have a good family and a good life you are more likely to stay good because you have those people influencing you.

The girls are liberating the fantastic (Thomas, 2019) by releasing Luke from his status as "villain" in their imaginations. In doing so, they are giving more complexity to the traditional dichotomous conceptions of heroes and villains. The readers extended this conversation by discussing how

environmental factors influence characters into whether they become heroes or villains. These factors can have far-reaching consequences, especially for characters with superpowers:

> Athena: If you think about superheroes, if something good happens in their childhood that will make them fight for what's right.
>
> Liz: Or something really bad happens.
>
> Athena: If something really bad happens in their life, the character will want revenge. I'm sorry, I feel like such a little nerd knowing about superheroes but I have a little brother so that's my excuse.
>
> Cookie: You have your excuses so it's ok.
>
> Athena: You can handle life both ways. It all depends on your personality. If something bad happens to you, you can try to stop it from happening to other people or you can just sulk about and try to kill everybody who would do a similar thing to you.
>
> Liz: I think it's a choice, when something happens to you, you either decide to become a villain or become a hero.

This idea of "choice" in whether a person is good or bad was further extended into real-life constructions of good and evil. The following conversation was held after the events of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012, which the girls were attempting to sort through their emotions:

> Jess: I don't think anyone really is bad I believe that even bad guys in stories have good insides.
>
> Cookie: Yeah.
>
> Aviaei: Jess is evil! She is trying to warp our minds!
>
> Liz: Hey she's playing devil's advocate that's good...shhh!
>
> Jess: I just think that everyone has good in them even though they truly believe that they are bad. So there really are no bad people.
>
> Cassidy: Going back to what Jess said, no one is actually bad they all have good in them, that's sort of true but like sometimes people are just bad.
>
> Athena: Like Adolph Hitler. What? It's true, he's evil! I hate him!
>
> Cassidy: Some people are bad even though they have good in them, but sometimes they just ignore it, so they are bad. Like the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. The person doing the shooting, he was just genuinely bad.

Athena: No he wasn't; he had a mental illness.

Liz: That's no reason for shooting somebody though. I agree with Jess because everyone

has good in them, just because they ignore it doesn't mean they are always totally bad. They

just act bad. You never really know these things because you have to be inside their brain to

get that.

Athena: And you can't just pinpoint yourself – I'm bad.

Liz: Yeah, when we are talking about people who do mass shootings, such as that, this

always bugs me, people aren't always bad. Things happen.

Athena: There are bad people in the world.

Liz: There are bad people but they aren't always bad. Were you really bad when you were

a baby?

Jess: Everyone is born good.

Katie: Yes, babies everywhere.

These discussions, generated from their feelings towards Luke, led the girls to the following conclusion that "there is good in people even if they ignore it" (Liz). Their understandings about the actions and intentions of villains in the world of Percy Jackson helped the girls to sort through their feelings about the actions and intentions of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooter.

DISCUSSION
FANTASY AND THE PROMOTION
OF SOCIAL AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

This study described how adolescents came to learn about their own social world through their engagement in costumed worlds "of bold exploits and super powers" (Parks, n.d.). These avid readers' infatuation with the relationships of characters like Percy, Annabeth, Luke, Jason, Piper, Hazel, Leo, and Frank helped them develop an increased sensitivity to the thoughts and feelings of others. Specifically, their connection to Annabeth, a strong female, character led them to develop their understandings of gender equality. They analyzed the balance of strong male and female characters in the world of Percy Jackson and purposefully noted how Rick Riordan contested the gender stereotype of males rescuing the females from perilous situations. They proceeded to challenge stereotypes by providing examples of strong women in real-life situations. They imagined themselves becoming emotionally strong for others. They wondered why females have been

submissive to males across cultures and history and ensured that males were not left out of the movement for female equality.

In this study, the descriptions of how the girls developed their understandings of perfection and heroism and good and evil illustrate the potential of fantasy to promote the development of real-life issues. In Timmerman's (1983) critical analysis of fantasy, he discusses how the classical hero is considered partly divine because he possesses intelligence or physical strength beyond the grasp of the common person. The possession of superhuman gifts compels the hero to act for others "in such a way as to restore order in their lives" (p. 45). Yet, the modern fantasy hero is "a very ordinary character [who] is tested beyond expectation or human hope for success" (p. 45). In fantasy, heroism is established at considerable risk in which he or she walks "on the slippery edge of fear and failure" (p. 46). The fact that a modern fantasy hero chose to take a risk is exactly what makes him a hero. The girls developed this understanding as they discussed their love for the flaws or imperfections of their favorite Percy Jackson characters. These avid readers noted that even though these demigod characters used their divine powers to engage in adventures that saved all of humanity, these characters were heroic because of their human imperfections. They risked their lives for each other, not knowing whether they would survive the encounter. This understanding led to further discussions about what it means for the average person to be heroic. They argued for average people being more courageous than characters in novels because they take greater risks in order to save others. They continued this line of thinking by envisioning perfection as a state that is unattainable for normal people, however, normal people should strive to be the best that they can be.

According to Timmerman (1983) another dominant characteristic of fantasy is the clear separation of good and evil: "In all fantasy literature there is a keen recognition of the forces of good and evil, a sense of right and wrong; but also a driving necessity to act upon it" (p. 74). The hero must be free to choose between the forces of good and evil but his choices have consequences far beyond the confines of his life. The girls also came to this conclusion about good and evil that exists in our modern world. Through their connection to Luke, they came to understand that environmental factors lead people to become heroes or villains. Yet, people do have a choice as to whether to become good or evil. This idea was prominent as the girls attempted to resolve their feelings about whether the Sandy Hook shooter was evil. They concluded that everyone is born with goodness inside of them but it is a choice as to whether people become evil.

While this study supports literary proponents who suggest that fantasy for young adults contains powerful messages that challenge adolescents' thinking about themselves, others, and the larger social world (Doughty, 2013; Kozak & Recchia, 2019; Kurkjian et al., 2006), this study also brings up the question about the use of high quality fantasy in adolescent discussion groups. Which fantasy novels are considered sufficiently groundbreaking to warrant having discussions in adolescent classrooms? Proponents in the literary field distinguish good or high-quality fantasy as having complex characters, clearly defined values, complex distinctions between good and evil, and sufficient complexity to demonstrate the importance of questioning the status quo (Doughty, 2013; Kozak & Recchia, 2019). While many adults question the quality of *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* and its sequel *Heroes of Olympus* series for its predictable plots, one-dimensional characters, and its world that seems "positively contrived to repel adult readers, so thoroughgoing is their affectation of teen goofiness" (Mead, 2014, n.p.). This study suggests that *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* and its sequel *Heroes of Olympus* series has the above characteristics of high quality young adult fantasy. Perhaps what makes a fantasy novel worth discussing in middle and high school classrooms is whether it evokes an emotional response in adolescents. A groundbreaking novel should "generate excitement through compelling themes" (Nichols, 2008, p. 23), and should involve ways in which characters interact and navigate personal relationships. Novels should "challenge us conceptually, to push us to examine what our concepts mean and what we use them to do" (John, 1998, p. 331). Rick Riordan's world of Percy Jackson speaks to pre-adolescent and adolescent readers: "Riordan's sense of what kids will find interesting or funny is clearly highly attuned, even if it might occasionally strike other, less best-selling adults as somewhat peculiar" (Mead, 2014, n.p.).

Thomas (2019) has described the diversity crisis in young adult literature as an imagination gap. Caused in part by the lack of diversity in teen life depicted in books, she argues that youth grow up without seeing diverse images "in the mirrors, windows, and doors of children's and young adult literature, they are confined to single stories about the world around them, and ultimately the development of their imaginations is affected" (p. 6). As immersion into fantasy worlds have the potential to guide readers in navigating their own worlds, "illuminating the imaginary stories of people of color at the margins can reveal much, especially for today's youth" (p. 11). While *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* series has focused on Percy, a teenager with messy jet black hair with a Mediterranean complexion, and Annabeth, a teenager with curly blond hair with tan skin, Rick Riordan has slowly included more diverse characters in each series he has written (Neale, 2017;

Tennyson, 2013). In the *Heroes of Olympus* series, Piper is of Cherokee descent, Leo has been described as a "Latino Santa's Elf" (Neale, 2017), Frank is Chinese-Canadian, and Hazel is an African-American from Louisiana. Children of diverse backgrounds can begin to see themselves in the world of Percy Jackson. They can "imagine themselves being able to control fire like Leo, pull precious metals from earth like Hazel, shape-shift like Frank, and influence people like Piper. Children of color can see themselves as heroes, as they should." (Tennyson, 2013). Future research should explore how adolescents from diverse backgrounds are affected by their representation in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* and its sequel *Heroes of Olympus* series and how these representations shape their thinking about themselves, others, and their social worlds.

In many of our English Language Arts classrooms, teachers are only requiring students to read short passages of realistic novels, rather than reading the novel itself. Teachers are using these short passages to focus on discrete measurable skills required to pass high-stakes standardized tests. Thus, it is becoming ever more important to promote the sustained and engaged reading of all types of novels that take adolescent readers on emotional journeys and help them to develop stronger grasps of themselves and their social worlds.

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