

# Gender and Education in Luxembourg and Beyond

**Local Challenges and New Perspectives**

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# **Performing the ‘feminine’ subject of education: lessons from Matilda**

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Perspectives

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## Introduction

Recent debates in education have focused on the significant presence of women in schools and its presumed effects on children. The upholders of the ‘feminisation thesis’ have often understood feminisation in statistical and cultural terms as essentialist, and dichotomous views of gender conflate the presence of women with the spreading of ‘feminine’ values. In the context of education, this has led to a view that schools have become ‘feminised spaces’ where women and girls are thought to be at an advantage.

I have revisited and challenged some of the assumptions underpinning the feminisation thesis in a recent monograph, *Teachers, Gender and the Feminisation Debate* (Mooreau, 2018). In this chapter, I further discuss this thesis and its limitations by focusing my attention on a well-known element of Western popular culture: *Matilda* (Dahl, 1988). *Matilda* is a famous novel by Roald Dahl (1916-1990), the world-renowned British author of Norwegian descent. I concentrate on this book for three main reasons. First, popular culture and fictional literature in particular can operate as a magnifying and disrupting lens of the cultural tropes that operate in society, thus encouraging the reader to critically revisit these norms (Allen et al, 2018). Second, *Matilda* is an influential novel, which has been translated into 58 languages, and extensively read beyond the boundaries of Dahl’s home country. It can justifiably be described as a ‘best-seller’ and a ‘classic’. It also represents a prominent feature of British and Western popular culture, as exemplified by its multiple on screen and on stage adaptations. Third, *Matilda* is rather unusual in its foregrounding of three female characters who, in the book, all embody a specific relationship with education: Matilda (a young girl of primary school age), Miss Honey (Matilda’s schoolteacher) and Miss Trunchbull (the school’s head teacher).

Drawing on a post-structuralist feminist perspective, my intention in this chapter is to analyse the various tropes and binaries mobilised by the author to describe these three characters’ performances of the ‘feminine’ subject of education. I argue that *Matilda* re/produces, to some extent, some of the dominant gender norms at play in the late 20th-early 21st century while simultaneously resisting the same norms and shedding light on the limitations of the ‘feminisation thesis’. Ultimately, *Matilda* opens up the possibilities of rethinking the positions of women in education and the promise of feminist futures, although a certain amount of wariness is called for in the light of some of the conservative and neo-liberal caveats likely to explain the novel’s persistent success.

## Theoretical and methodological frameworks

This chapter does not claim to explore *Matilda* from a literary perspective. Instead, I have come to it as a sociologist of gender and education whose work is primarily informed by feminist post-structuralist theories and, linked to this conceptual framework, concerned with identity trans/formation and relationships of power. The chapter focuses on the written text rather than its reading by specific audiences. I do, however, acknowledge that texts are relatively open in terms of how they can be ‘read’ (i.e. interpreted) and that readings are active processes. As notoriously argued by Bronwyn Davies in her

poststructuralist study of young readers' engagement with *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1980) and other children's fiction:

Poststructuralist theory argues that people are not socialised into the social world, but that they go through a process of subjectification. In socialisation theory, the focus is on the process of shaping the individual that is undertaken by others. In poststructuralist theory the focus is on the way each person actively takes up the discourses through which they and others speak/write the world into existence as if it were their own. (Davies, 1993, p. 13; original emphasis).

As noted by Davies, such a conceptualisation of subjectification and agency is in sharp contrast with socialisation theories and commonplace concerns that cultural artefacts such as books, films, lyrics or video games 'impact' on people, particularly young people (see critique in Walkerdine, 2007). Consistent with Bronwyn Davies' and Valerie Walkerdine's conceptualisation of the subject, James Pope's and Julia Round's (2015) empirical study of primary school children's responses to heroism in *Matilda* (the novel and the film) does highlight how the text is negotiated (rather than passively taken up) by readers.

If texts are always open, then my readings of *Matilda* are most certainly framed by my own positionality at a given time. While I enjoyed reading the works of Roald Dahl as a child, I only read *Matilda* in my adult years (I would have been in my teens when it was published). I read it to and with my daughter. On the same days we read *Matilda*, I would have been working, among other things, on what would become my second monograph: *Teachers, gender and the feminisation debate* (Moreau, 2018). It is fair to say that both activities mutually influenced each other: as I discovered *Matilda*, the characters of Miss Honey, Miss Trunchbull and, of course, *Matilda* herself, made me reflect on the fraught relationship between girls/women and education. As I wrote about the masculinist epistemologies, pedagogies and education policies, which, more often than not, disvalue women (Burke and Moreau, 2020), my mind kept going back to *Matilda*, Miss Honey and Miss Trunchbull. Reading, talking and writing about *Matilda* was a joyful and intellectually satisfying experience. Weaving together the making of motherhood and the doing of academic work, two activities usually constructed as distinct or even antagonistic (Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2012), was not only pleasant but, at times, also felt subversive.

In this socially situated 'reading' of *Matilda*, I approach it as a text which draws on the discourses available, first, to the author and, second, to the reader, with discourse here meant to refer to 'a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events' (Burr, 1995, p. 48). Rather than being concerned with how the text mis/represents the social world, my primary concern lies with its performativity. As argued by Litosseliti:

Language does not simply reflect social reality, but it is also constitutive of such reality, in other words, it shapes how we see ourselves and the world. If language use is constitutive rather than indexical, then it has the potential to help establish

and maintain social and power relations, values and identities, as well as to challenge routine practice and contribute towards social change. (Litosseliti, 2006, p. 9).

In other words, I approach *Matilda* as a story informed by the discourses of its time while simultaneously re/producing and resisting these discourses. Simply put, *Matilda* draws on and produces the social world, a process mediated by readers' socially situated meaning-making activities (Hall, 1973). In that respect, the fiction genre, and the children's fiction genre in particular, grants to the author considerable room for manoeuvre in the stories they tell. While Dahl can never step out of the social world, he is not expected to write a 'credible' story either. In the world of children's fiction, playfulness and creativity, including the use of caricatures – Dahl's trademarks – are valued, even encouraged, and can provide opportunities to subvert well-established gender and other social norms. As such, the text can magnify or reinvent, as well as magnify to reinvent, the norms that operate in society, ultimately encouraging the reader to critically revisit these norms (Allen et al, 2018).

On a more methodological level, my primary concern lies with proceeding with 'the analysis of a piece of text in order to reveal either the discourses operating within it or the linguistic and rhetorical devices that are used in its construction' (Burr, 1995, p. 184). This involves repeated readings of the text as well as engaging with its multiple adaptations (including watching the film, attending a performance of the show in London West End and visiting the *Matilda* at 30 exhibition at Downing College, Cambridge). During the analysis, a focal concern was the use of oppositional and hierarchical binaries, with one of the binary terms usually 'marked' negatively. This concern is maybe best explicated by Maggie MacLure when she writes:

This oppositional logic reflects a form of 'metaphysical' thinking that has been practised by Western philosophy from Plato onwards, and which [Derrida] called 'logocentrism'. Some core principle or concept is established as the superior term – the first, last, deepest, universal, central, purest or most fundamental of all – in a 'violent hierarchy' of meaning: 'good before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc.' (MacLure, 2003, p. 10, drawing on Derrida, 1998).

## **Matilda: setting the scene**

*Matilda*, the novel, centres on the life of its eponymous character, Matilda Wormwood, a five-year old precocious, highly intelligent and spirited child. Neglected by her parents, Matilda finds refuge in the books procured at the local library. When her parents finally concede to sending her to school, she becomes faced with more abuse, this time from the school headteacher, Miss Trunchbull, while finding solace in the teachings and company of Miss Honey, her schoolteacher.

Published in 1988 by Jonathan Cape, London, the original edition of *Matilda* was illustrated by Quentin Blake, the well-known cartoonist, illustrator, and children's writer. Like the popularity of *Matilda*, the association between Dahl and Blake is long-lasting and continues beyond Dahl's death, with Blake having illustrated 18 of Dahl's books. *Matilda* is also included in US-based *Time Magazine's* list of the 100 best young-adult books of all time (*Time magazine*, no date). In the UK, shortly after its release, *Matilda* won the Children's Book Award from The Federation of Children's Book Groups (an award given out for books voted to be the best by children themselves). In 1998, it was voted the 'Nation's Favourite Children's Book' by a BBC Bookworm Poll. To this day, the book has been translated into 58 languages, with over 17 million copies sold worldwide (Roald Dahl website, 2021).

The novel has also been published as an audio book (read by British actress Kate Winslet), as well as adapted into a film (De Vito, 1996) and a BBC radio drama (Grove, 2009). It was first adapted into a musical in 1990 by the UK-based Redgrave Theatre, with the show touring in the UK. In 2010, *Matilda* was adapted into a musical for the second time (*Matilda the Musical*, Kelly, 2010), originally staged in Stratford-upon-Avon by the Royal Shakespeare Company from November 2010 to January 2011, before becoming a more permanent feature of the London West End in November 2011. Since then, it has been showing several times a day at the London-based Cambridge Theatre, until the show got temporarily suspended in March 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. In April 2013, it premiered at the Shubert Theatre in Broadway, New York, with the final performance taking place on 1 January 2017. The musical has also toured across the world, including in Australia, Canada, China, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, South Africa, the UK and the US. As of 2018, *Matilda the Musical* had been viewed by 18 million people in 65 cities (Ferguson, 2018). In 2018, Netflix announced the launch of an animated series adapting *Matilda* and other Roald Dahl stories. The same year, Quentin Blake produced a series of drawing imagining *Matilda's* chosen career as a grown-up woman (*Matilda at 30*). In 2020-2021, Blake's artwork was shown at the Heong Gallery, Downing College, Cambridge University, as part of the 40 women for Downing exhibition, which coincided with the 40th anniversary of the admission of women to Blake's alma mater. In its various iterations, *Matilda* has received multiple accolades and proved an enduring popular success.

## **The 'feminine' subjects of education: *Matilda*, *Miss Honey* and *Miss Trunchbull***

### ***Matilda Wormwood* ('*Matilda*')**

*Matilda* stands out in the book and in literature at large for being a 'girl genius' and at times a 'hero' – a classed and gendered positioning which, more often than not, evades girls (Mendick, 2006). Her association with genius is reinforced by a set of binary oppo-



sitions which contrasts her extraordinary intellectual and telekinetic abilities (under certain circumstances, she can move objects from a distance) with those of other members of her family: her mother, chiefly interested in bingo and hair dye; her father, a fraudulent car dealer and the main recipient of Matilda's tricks; and her older brother, Michael, who bullies her and is expected to take over his father's business. Her extraordinary abilities reach across school subjects and domains of life, ranging from holding elaborate discussions to mentally computing complex mathematical operations. Her extraordinary abilities are further emphasised through her telekinetic powers, both of which are linked – once she moves to a more advanced class, she suddenly loses these powers. Yet, contrarily to portraits of the male genius in popular culture, she is not devoid of social skills and empathy (Epstein et al, 2010).

Matilda is however a relatively complex character. Despite her extraordinary abilities, she occupies a subordinate status in her family and her school due to being a girl child.<sup>1</sup> While kind at heart, she often plays cruel tricks. However, those tricks always appear motivated by a quest for justice and fairness and are directed to those who are cruel to her and to others. After discovering the exact nature of the relationship between Miss Trunchbull and Miss Honey, and how the latter had suffered from the former's actions, she uses her telekinetic powers to save her teacher and the other pupils from the wrath of the much-feared headteacher. In that respect, through its association with genius and heroism, *Matilda* (the novel) and Matilda (the character) can be read as disturbing the conventional tropes, which link the figure of the genius with middle-class, adult masculinity. The fact that the victims of her tricks (her father and the headteacher) are constructed as masculine figures also opens the text to a reading of the character of Matilda as a feminist hero fighting the social injustices of an adult-dominated and patriarchal world.

### **Jennifer Honey ('Miss Honey')**

The compassionate figure of Miss Honey, the caring, well-mannered, enabling and 'feminine' primary teacher, offers a stark contrast with the figure of Miss Trunchbull, the abusive, repulsive and 'masculine' headteacher. In the book, Miss Honey is described as having 'a lovely pale oval Madonna face' with the body of 'a porcelain figure', while also possessing 'that rare gift for being adored by every small child under her care' (Dahl, 1988, p. 51). The comparison of her face with those of a madonna is reminiscent of the virginal construction of White women teachers discussed in the academic literature (see, e.g., Mallozzi and Campbell Galman, 2014). Her caring, sacrificial attitude towards her students also echoes the child-centred theories which have imbued Western pedagogies since the 1960s, as well as constructions of White women teachers as acting *in loco parentis* (the former conveyed in a not-so-subtle way in the story ending, as Miss

1 'Being very small and very young, the only power Matilda had over anyone in her family was brain-power. For sheer cleverness she could run things around them all. But the fact remained that any five-year-old girl in any family was always obliged to do as she was told.' (Dahl, 1988, p. 43)

Honey becomes Matilda's mother, after Matilda's parents run from the police and abandon her).

The character of Miss Honey represents a stark contrast to Miss Trunchbull and to Matilda's mother, Mrs Wormwood ('You chose books. I chose looks', declares Mrs Wormwood to Miss Honey as the latter pays Matilda's family a visit to enquire about their daughter; Dahl, 1988, p. 92). Where Matilda has extraordinary abilities, Miss Honey is at times powerless – and indeed it is Matilda who saves her and other children from Miss Trunchbull's physical and emotional abuse, in contrast with common tropes, which construct the male adult as the saviour. In that respect, while Matilda may be read as a feminist hero, Miss Honey performs a more compliant and, thus, conventional feminine subject.

### **Agatha Trunchbull ('Miss Trunchbull')**

In *Matilda*, Miss Trunchbull is described as:

[...] a gigantic holy terror, a fierce tyrannical monster who frightened the life out of pupils and teachers alike. There was an aura of menace about her even at a distance, and when she came up close you could almost feel the dangerous heat radiating from her as from a red-hot rod of metal. When she marched – Miss Trunchbull never walked, she always marched like a stormtrooper with long strides and arms aswinging – when she marched along a corridor you could actually hear her snorting as she went, and if a group of children happened to be in her path, she ploughed right on through them like a tank, with small people bouncing off her to left and right. (Dahl, 1988, p. 52)

The character of Miss Trunchbull conveys the fraught cultural relationship between women and authority, including in spaces constructed as 'feminised'-schools (Moreau, 2018). Women who lead are an 'oddity', when they are not simply, as in the case of Miss Trunchbull, a monstrosity. Indeed, headteachers in children's fiction are nearly always men (see Thompson, 2014). While they are not always constructed in a flattering light (see for example the title character in *The Demon Headmaster* – Cross, 1982, and its many book sequels and TV adaptations), their representations are characterised by a level of diversity which, overwhelmingly, evades representations of women headteachers.

The contrast between Miss Trunchbull and Miss Honey further emphasises the former's performance of masculinity. When Miss Honey enacts child-centred pedagogies, Miss Trunchbull goes as far as to describe children as 'disgusting'<sup>2</sup>, while also demonstrating a particular hatred of girls.<sup>3</sup> Where Miss Trunchbull discursively engages in the othering of children, Miss Honey's connection with Matilda (and her description of her as 'a grown-up child' to indicate an element of maturity beyond her years) recognis-

2 'I have never been able to understand why small children are so disgusting' (Dahl, 1988, p. 153).

3 'Nasty dirty things, little girls are' (Dahl, 1988, p. 86).

es Matilda's vulnerability as a child while steering clear of the condescending attitude often characteristic of children-adults relationships (de Beauvoir, 1958).

When I attended a performance of *Matilda: The Musical*, at the Cambridge Theatre in the London's West End, I noticed that the show followed up a different storyline and offered an alternative 'happy ending' to the novel. With Miss Honey becoming the new headteacher, the show opened up to the possibility of a more 'feminine' style of leadership – in the novel Miss Trunchbull is replaced by 'the excellent Mr Trilby' (Dahl, 1988, p. 192). Also telling of the fraught relationship between femininity and leadership is the fact that, in *Matilda: The Musical*, Miss Trunchbull is literally a man in disguise, as her character is interpreted by a male actor – a casting choice and a cross-dressing practice which mobilises the enduring British tradition of the pantomime as cultural resource (Davis, 2014).

The relative youth of Miss Honey also offers an interesting contrast with the more mature Miss Trunchbull. While headteachers are, predictably, often older than teachers, the narrative also feeds into the trope of the 'older woman' in the literature and society at large, a group which experience 'the double standards of ageing' (Sontag, 1978), including in school settings (George and Maguire, 1998). This is a widespread trope in Roald Dahl's work – think for example of the two abusive aunts in *James and the Giant Peach* (Dahl, 1961) and the characters of the witches in Dahl's eponymous book (Dahl, 1983).

## Lessons from Matilda

In this chapter, I have offered a socially-situated reading of *Matilda*'s three main 'feminine' subjects of education. While *Matilda* has sometimes been criticised for its simplistic and binary portrayals of girls and women, I argue that the novel offers a rich and subversive account of feminine subjectivities in education. I am not denying here that Dahl's construction of women's characters can be read as such (Culley, 1991), nor am I suggesting that Dahl's intentions were (or were not) underpinned by feminist concerns. Suffice to remind here that Roald Dahl has made in his life a number of misogynist, racist and anti-Semitic statements (Anderson, 2016).

Whether it may have been or not the author's intentions, I argue that the centering and binarisation of women which characterise *Matilda* can be interpreted as subversive. Not only does the story centre around three women, but they also interact extensively with each other. Romantic entanglements are not a key concern (meaning that the book passes the Bechdel test with flying colours). Nor are these three women passive or powerless. Instead, each of them seems to enjoy a unique relationship with power, meaning that the reading of *Matilda* has the potential to provide a pedagogical moment to think about gender and power in society. The character of Matilda, a young schoolgirl with extraordinary abilities and a concern for fairness, disturbs the common trope of the adult male genius. Matilda, despite being subordinated as a girl child in her home and at school, is a powerful, change generating character – so powerful in fact that she will rescue others. Miss Honey, being docile and compliant, embodies a more conven-

tional type of femininity compared with Matilda. This is not to say that Miss Honey is fully powerless – as an educator she would have great power in the classroom through the pedagogical and care practices which often go unnoticed and unrewarded due to their association with femininity ('the gentle use of pastoral power'; Thompson, 2014, p. 382). Miss Trunchbull also represents a figure of power as the headteacher, and a much feared one at that, although her use of power is, in the light of contemporary moral values, condemnable.

Moreover, while it is rare for research to study representations of teachers, schools, and educational administrators in popular culture, it is even rarer that such work is concerned with relations of power (Thompson, 2014). Matilda does not just foreground three female characters, it also centres on gender and generational power relationships, with multiple explicit mentions of gender, for example when Matilda's abilities and behaviour are undermined and condemned by her parents and her headteacher for being a girl child. It is worth noticing here that the most blatantly adult-centric and sexist statements are pronounced by those taking up in the story the position of the 'villains' (Miss Trunchbull and Matilda's family, particularly her father), and that those villains are ultimately being defeated. Thus, such statements are unlikely to be read as an endorsement of misogyny and child-hatred. Instead, as Culley observes, 'By giving the villain bold sexist statements that the reader will be able to recognise from experience, Dahl successfully ridicules this kind of everyday sexism' (1991, p. 64; see also discussion in Mulders, 2016).

Last, the use of archetypal tropes (Mulders, 2016) and binary oppositions (MacLure, 2003) has a heuristic virtue as they enable the author to ridicule the gendered and adult-centric norms that operate in society at broad and in education in particular. In that respect, the book's effects are not dissimilar to what some post-structural feminist artists have tried to achieve, albeit with a more adult audience in mind (think for example of Cindy Sherman's fictionalised self-portraiture; Sherman, 1977-1980). Miss Trunchbull is not simply mean; she is abuse impersonated, lifting students by the hair and ears and occasionally sending them flying up in the air. She is so cruel that many scenes edge towards the grotesque and the satirical. Likewise, Miss Honey's constantly caring and sweet demeanour and her powerlessness in the face of Miss Trunchbull's abuse could read as a satire of conventional femininity. The use of nominative determinism (their personalities are closely aligned with their names) suggests that Dahl was being playful in the use of stereotypes, rather than, say, lacked imagination in his portraying of female characters. It is also worth noting here that the rare male characters in the novel (e.g., Matilda's father and brother) are, like Miss Trunchbull, portrayed in caricatural and negative terms.

I want to conclude by questioning why Matilda resonates so much with our times. More problematic than the simplistic, binary constructions of female characters are the silences in Matilda, Whiteness being, in my view, the most striking one. Through the absence of significant Black and Minority ethnic characters (ethnicity is not clearly stated, but when it is, the characters are always White), Whiteness is normalised, and Blackness is rendered invisible. In other words, Matilda is a tale of Whiteness, which does not tell its name. The White British world of Matilda, with its blatant absence of

Minority ethnic characters and migrants, certainly resonates with the rise of conservative politics and the melancholic fantasies of a lost empire entertained by its proponents (Tyler, 2013).

Matilda lends itself to a conservative and neoliberal reading. The character of Matilda itself embodies and typifies the neoliberal subject in various ways. After years of abuse, Matilda is adopted by Miss Honey, in a happy ending pointing to the diversity of families and to families as self-made (as encapsulated by the term 'families of choice'; Weston, 1991). While this inclusive construction of the family is welcome, its electiveness and other features of the book mean that Matilda can read as a neoliberal tale of free choice. Through grit, resilience, education, and the right connections, even the poorest and the more marginalised can better themselves and succeed against the odds. In the White world of Roald Dahl, this subaltern subject would have been a working-class girl child. Through the prism of neoliberal ideologies, Matilda becomes a figure of female empowerment (Dickinson, 2017), a girl child who elevates beyond her gender and class, an underdog who succeeds against the odds. At times when the education of girls is often commodified as a way to enact change and make the world a better place, Matilda's power of self-transformation and of transforming others (Kulz, 2017) resonates with the construction of the girl child as the ideal subject of neoliberalism. Like the self-made family, the self-made individual appeals to neoliberal ideologies seeking to explain an individual's position in life through choice and minimising the effects of social structures on life opportunities (Lemke, 2001). It is maybe rather telling that Blake's drawings of Matilda at 30 represent her in an array of diverse but highly successful positions ranging from astrophysicist to chief executive of the British Library, with the conversion of her extraordinary abilities in career terms left unquestioned.

Fiction has increasingly become a legitimate field of enquiry for media, cultural and sociological studies scholars, many of whom have turned their attention to popular culture constructions of schools and other communities (see, e.g., Shoffner, 2016, a collection of 19 essays on teachers in fiction and film). Matilda offers a powerful pedagogical terrain to discuss femininities and power relationships in education contexts and beyond and to challenge simplistic constructions of schools as 'feminised'. Through its magnification and disruption of gendered tropes, it renders visible some of the discourses and power relationships at play in society (including, though not only, in fiction), and invites the reader to imagine alternative futures. However, for this pedagogical moment to achieve its potential, I argue that we need to reflect on the absent presence of other power relationships (including ethnicity) and on the neoliberal appropriation of Matilda as a tale of social mobility through self-empowerment. Celebrating the individual successes of a handful of women who are disproportionately White and often middle-class risks reinforcing the view that those who fail do so because of their own shortcomings. Challenging the deep-seated hierarchies, which exclude and misrecognise women, requires that we reconnect with a more collectivist and radical understanding of gender and practice reflexivity and criticality in considering why some stories appeal to us when others do not.

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