

The Making(s) of a Girl: Gender and Humanness in Frances Hardinge's *Cuckoo Song*

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Abstract

A common trend in modern fantasy literature for children and young adults is to describe the world from the monster's point of view. Frances Hardinge's *Cuckoo Song* (2014) explores what it means to be a girl from the perspective of a changeling. In the article, I analyze the changeling motif with a focus on gender and humanness. The article shows how non-normative femininity and the non-human are intertwined in the depiction of the changeling. The girl's feeling of otherness is portrayed through her unruly and makeshift body that threatens to betray her by falling apart or taking control of her actions. Only by moving beyond restrictive notions of girlhood and affirming the non-human, can a resolution be achieved. The changeling in *Cuckoo Song* juxtaposes the non-human with humans that have been represented as the other in Western society, like women, children, and foreign people. Thus, the narrative sheds light on practices of othering and the gendered, racialized, and age-specific norms of human life. Through an exploration of the effects of dehumanization, Hardinge's novel devises a post-human ethic underlining all creatures' right to life.

Keywords: *Frances Hardinge, young adult literature, changeling, femininity, non-human*

In a popular nineteenth-century nursery rhyme, little girls are said to be made of “[s]ugar and spice and all things nice”,⁷⁸ thus delineating an ideal of feminine sweetness and docility. Girls in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature were regularly met by similar expectations. Girlhood classics such as L. M. Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (1872) and L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) depict a sprightly protagonist who struggles with her temper, flighty imagination, talkativeness or perceived lack of beauty and neatness. These and other books for girls explore a common difficulty to live up to “sugary” girlhood norms.⁷⁹ A different and possibly less palatable recipe for a girl is put

⁷⁸ Iona Opie & Peter Opie, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, rev. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 101.

⁷⁹ See e.g. Shirley Foster & Judy Simons, *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-readings of Classic Stories for Girls* (London: Macmillan, 1995); Peter Stoneley, *Consumerism and American Girls' Literature, 1860–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Michelle Ann Abate, *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).



forward in Frances Hardinge's *Cuckoo Song* (2014). The central character Trista is "made of sticks and papers and bits and bobs and thorns and painted eyes".⁸⁰ Unbeknownst to her, she is a changeling put in a family as a replacement for their daughter. Trista's memories of a previous life and sense of self are fragmented. While striving to maintain an appearance of normalcy, her queer behavior frequently bewilders her family and herself. Just like her counterparts in many classic books for girls, Trista is trying to make sense of her surroundings and how to fit in.

Frances Hardinge is a contemporary British author of fantasy for children and young adults. Many of her novels are narrated by female characters, who suffer from othering or social invisibility. For example, *A Face Like Glass* (2012) features a heroine that is literally an outsider in her culture and *The Lie Tree* (2015), recipient of the prestigious Costa Book of the Year Award in 2015, explores the restricted agency of girls and women in Victorian England. In these and other stories by Hardinge, contemporary discourses on power, gender, age, and race are de-familiarized and interrogated through narratives that take place in fantasy worlds or in the past.⁸¹ *Cuckoo Song* is set in England in the 1920s and merges elements of historic fiction, fairy folklore and the gothic. This kind of "hybrid genre fusion" is characteristic of both Hardinge's novels and contemporary young adult literature.⁸² Trista, too, can be described as a hybrid character. As a lifelike doll made of twigs, she transcends binaries such as animate and inanimate, human and non-human, nature and culture. Her liminal position also enables her to pass between the human city and the fairy world of the Besiders. The experience of being a girl is formulated through these intersections.

In this article, I will analyze the changeling motif in *Cuckoo Song* from the perspectives of gender and humanness. Hardinge's literary method often involves making metaphors or abstract phenomena concrete. In *A Skinful of Shadows* (2017), the protagonist carries other people's souls inside her, illustrating how she is torn between conflicting wills, while the tree in *The Lie Tree* feeds off lies and can only prosper in darkness. It is destroyed when exposed to light, just as shedding light on a lie will rob it of its force.⁸³ The changeling motif in *Cuckoo Song* similarly gives a tangible form to adolescent fears, in the words of Geoffrey Miles, "of being an outsider, a misfit, an alien in the family or in the normal adult world".⁸⁴ Miles reads

⁸⁰ Frances Hardinge, *Cuckoo Song* (London: Macmillan Children's Books, 2018), p. 116. Further references to the novel will be given within parentheses in the main text. Trista is successively called Triss, not-Triss and Trista in the novel but for the sake of readability I will consistently call her Trista. I will also refer to the family she is placed in as *her* family, since that is how they are described in the main part of the novel. This, however, partly conceals the scrambling of identities and family relations that is at the heart of the changeling motif.

⁸¹ Cf. Blanka Grzegorzczuk, *Discourses of Postcolonialism in Contemporary British Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2014), Taylor and Francis eBooks Complete, chap. 5;

Geoffrey Miles, "Cuckoo Songs: The Changeling as Hero," in *New Directions in Children's Gothic: Debatable Lands*, ed. Anna Jackson (New York: Routledge, 2017), Taylor and Francis eBooks Complete, 32–50; and Elizabeth E. J. Gilbert, "The Lures and Limitations of the Natural Sciences: Frances Hardinge's *The Lie Tree*," in *Representations of Science in Twenty-First-Century Fiction: Human and Temporal Connectivities*, ed. Nina Engelhardt & Julia Hoydis (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), ProQuest Ebook Central, 133–150.

⁸² Gilbert, "The Lures and Limitations," 133. See also Rachel Falconer, *The Crossover Novel: Contemporary Children's Fiction and Its Adult Readership* (New York: Routledge, 2009), Proquest Ebook Central, 2–9.

⁸³ Lydia Kokkola, "Critical Plant Studies and Children's Literature," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Children's Literature*, ed. Clémentine Beauvais & Maria Nikolajeva (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 278.

⁸⁴ Miles, "Cuckoo Songs," 33.

the changeling as a metaphor for a teenager but gives less attention to the changeling as an embodied and gendered being. However, as Trista's process of animation makes clear, being alive is depicted as a corporeal experience in Hardinge's novel, regardless of the body consists of leaves and thorns or flesh and blood. The changeling's physical make-up simultaneously serves as a reminder of traditional representations of women and children as closer to nature than men.⁸⁵ Trista is at odds with and struggling to gain control of her unruly body that threatens to revert to the forest material it is made of. By focusing my discussion on the depiction of an embodied femininity, I wish to explore the makings of a girl.

Female Scripts

The 1920s was a time of great transformation and Hardinge's novel utilizes the conflicts of the interwar period as a backdrop for Trista's identity quest. As Miles has pointed out, the thematic centrality of change is implied by the pun at the core of the narrative: "the *changeling* is a figure of *change*".⁸⁶ *Cuckoo Song* deals with different reactions to modernity and the characters' handling of historical as well as personal transformation. Hardinge combines historic detail of the 1920s and folklore into a narrative where the vagaries of the modern world and the fairy realm overlap. Fairy stories have often described fairies as creatures of a distant past and suffering in modern times. This idea is incorporated into the novel but, as suggested by Miles, with a twist. Although the Besiders have lost their old haunts in the age of science and exploration, they flourish in the new types of uncertainties that have also been produced by urbanization, industrialization, and the ensuing break with tradition.⁸⁷ In particular, the war has generated different gendered scripts. A new generation of women has come forward and they are described in the novel with an allusion to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929): "Once they [women] kept to their pretty little paths and didn't step on the grass. But those that worked in the farms and factories during the War have a taste for running their own lives now, haven't they? So, all their menfolk are panicking. Frightened. *Uncertain*." (230)⁸⁸ Fairies and independent women both become representations of otherness in *Cuckoo Song*, and they intersect in the guise of the changeling girl.

Hardinge builds on gendered aspects of fairy folklore and its associations between women, children and changelings. According to Carole G. Silver, nineteenth-century England was virtually obsessed with fairies and changelings. Newspapers and courts reported of cases where women and children had been injured or killed by practices of exorcism. Fear of changelings became the focal point of "Victorian anxieties about difference, race and class".⁸⁹ Children or human women in liminal states, like brides and recent mothers, were the ones most

⁸⁵ See e.g., Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Sidney I. Dobrin & Kenneth B. Kidd, "Introduction: Into the Wild," in *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*, ed. Sidney I. Dobrin & Kenneth B. Kidd (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 4–7.

⁸⁶ Miles, "Cuckoo Songs," 46.

⁸⁷ Miles, "Cuckoo Songs," 41, 44.

⁸⁸ In the beginning of Woolf's essay, a woman walks on the grass of a university and is redirected to the gravel path, since only scholars are allowed on the turf. She uses this scene to discuss the ideological and physical obstacles intellectual women faced in contemporary society.

⁸⁹ Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), ProQuest Ebook Central, 60.

at risk of being abducted by fairy people.⁹⁰ In *Cuckoo Song*, the communities of Besiders and humans differ in many ways but share an androcentric power structure. All chief agents in the beginning of the story are males while girls and women get caught in their quarrels. One Besider, called the Architect, is constructing new homes for his people. He has asked a fairy doll-maker, the Shrike, to create Trista in order to replace Triss, a human girl whose father has angered the Architect by breaking a building contract. Another human, Mr. Grace, whose wife has been killed by a changeling, becomes involved in the search for Triss and attempts to stop the Besiders from establishing themselves in the human city. In this messy entanglement of individual disputes and competing aspirations, girls and women become the victims but also the means for males to reach their goals.

Contemporary gothic fiction for children and young adults are often told from the “monster’s” point-of-view and changeling stories are no exception.⁹¹ Changelings have traditionally been seen as an embodiment of difference. Human children whose behavior or appearances altered in inexplicable ways were suspected of having been taken by fairies and replaced by an imp or animated log.⁹² In modern narratives, the focus has shifted from the parents’ dread of an alien child to children’s fear of not belonging or the transformative experience of adolescence. Miles argues that *Cuckoo Song* takes the theme of alienation one step further by not revealing Trista’s identity as a changeling in the text or paratexts until one third into the narrative, which enhances the protagonist’s and the reader’s confusion.⁹³ Trista suffers from memory lapses, hears mysterious voices in her dreams and her body seems strange: “It felt as if there was a vast expanse of her, weighted down with rocks, and it was a surprise to see herself stretched out as a normal-sized lump under the counterpane and blankets.” (2) The experience is markedly physical. There is a dislocation between how she experiences and sees herself. The sense of estrangement is emphasized by descriptions of the body as a formless “expanse” or “lump”, as if she is a being who is trapped in a foreign element.

In fairy folklore, the changeling is characterized by, among other things, gluttony, fretfulness, and a malicious spirit.⁹⁴ Hardinge’s novel explicitly associates such behavior with deviations from a female norm. Trista seems to be at the mercy of her body that appears to have a will of its own. To her and her family’s horror, she is ravenous and feels as if there was “a raw gaping chasm at her core” (16). Apart from copious amounts of food, she secretly devours dolls, clothes, jewelry, and magazines in an attempt to “*seem normal*” (60) by not overeating in front of her parents. The demands on girls to be thin and have a tiny appetite were as insistent in the early twentieth century as they are today. Bursts of anger were also chastised. A good girl was supposed to keep control of her body and her mood, and this morale was often repeated in books for girls and advice manuals of the period.⁹⁵ When Trista’s father admonishes her for throwing a temper tantrum after not being allowed to satiate her hunger, he stresses that

⁹⁰ Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 59–87, 149–183.

⁹¹ Anna Jackson, “New Directions in Children’s Gothic: Debatable Lands,” in *New Directions in Children’s Gothic: Debatable Lands*, ed. Anna Jackson (New York: Routledge, 2017), Taylor and Francis eBooks Complete, 4–5 and Miles, “Cuckoo Songs,” 33.

⁹² Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 59–87.

⁹³ Miles, “Cuckoo Song,” 33 and 41.

⁹⁴ Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 60–62.

⁹⁵ Carolyn Daniel, *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children’s Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2006), chap. 2.

her actions are unfeminine: “‘That sort of behavior was not something I expected from my Triss,’ he said softly. ‘My Triss is a sweet, quiet, well-behaved girl. She doesn’t stamp and scream at the dinner table.’” (74) Her mother, too, declares her to be “a wild thing” (125) with a ferocious expression that should not be “in the face of my little girl” (125). The sweet little family girl is contrasted with a savage creature that is something other than a human child. By not affirming her parents’ notion of docile femininity, Trista can neither be a proper girl nor their daughter.

Trista’s attempts to behave in accordance with her family’s expectations expose gender as a performance. In Judith Butler’s words, gender is materialized through “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being”.⁹⁶ Rather than being the expression of an inner, natural core, Trista’s self is performed by repeating gestures that may make her pass as a girl. She is acting “how-to-be-Triss” (18) and her “Trissness closed in around her again, like cold, damp swaddling clothes” (64) but she constantly gets the words and movements slightly wrong. Being Triss is a role that does not suit her and neither, as it turns out, does it fit the real Triss. Any deviations from what her parents wish her to be is viewed as physical signs of illness and indirectly punished by the removal of things she enjoys or enforced stillness. Triss’ display of giddiness or attempts at independence were pathologized by her parents and resulted in visits to doctors. Trista, too, describes her feelings of disorientation in medicalized terms, as physical illness, insanity or being not normal: “*I’m ill, I’m mad, I’m horrible, I have to get better.*” (78) Her parents take her on a virtual tour of doctors where contemporary psychoanalytical theories of repressed memories and female hysteria are introduced, thus alluding to the medicalized discourse on femininity of the time.⁹⁷

The changeling functions as a catalyst within the family and reveals that all members are playing their parts in a dysfunctional drama, where Triss is supposed to be the good, sensitive girl and her younger sister Pen is cast as the black sheep.⁹⁸ The performative aspect of gender and family life is further underlined by the frequent use of similes mentioning paper, books, and scripts when describing Trista. She is literally depicted as a scripted being, powered by diary extracts and objects invested with the real Triss’ memories. In the beginning, the name Triss feels familiar “like a book falling open on a much-viewed page” (1) and Trista performs the expected story. The changeling’s borrowed identity and fluid subjectivity is displayed through the changing of names, representing different stages of selfhood: Triss – not-Triss – Trista. As is shown by the different designations, she is defined by her likeness to or difference from another girl that she both is and is not. In the same way, all family members keep up their roles out of habit or need. The parents’ retelling of memories is described as “family folklore, recited [...] in a solemn, ritual fashion” herding the girl’s recollections “into the neat pens of their stories, until she no longer knew what she actually remembered” (83). In a final confrontation with her parents, when Trista exposes their lies, she feels as if she “had ripped out the remaining pages of the script, and had fallen off the ragged edge of the paper” (146). There is no going back to the old tales after that. The whole family have been repeating parts

⁹⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 33.

⁹⁷ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and Culture in England, 1830–1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

⁹⁸ Miles, “Cuckoo Songs,” 43.

that they have grown out of, exposing the hollowness behind the respectable and harmonious facade.

The ideal of the sweet family girl is challenged both within the family and in society in *Cuckoo Song*. Whereas Trista's family has tried to stop time and the girls from growing up to avoid having to face their son's death in the war, his fiancé Violet has been transformed into a brazen modern woman. She has cut her hair, started smoking, wears knee length skirts and enjoys jazz, which are all tell-tale signs of the 1920s flapper.⁹⁹ Their mutual love of jazz creates an association between the new women and the Besiders. A fondness for music and dance also distinguishes fairy people and changelings in folklore.¹⁰⁰ The new woman of the fin-de-siècle was characterized by a greater visibility, independence, and mobility.¹⁰¹ In Hardinge's novel, Violet is constantly in motion, riding through town on her motorcycle. Her vagabond life turns out to be another effect of fairy magic, which strengthens the link between Besiders, modernity and new women. If Violet stays more than a few hours in the same place, her surroundings grow cold and it starts to snow. The enforced movement, however, proves to be a lifestyle that suits her: "it turns out I love speed, motion and change too, without them I go stir crazy" (400). Her ability to embrace instability and transformation makes her open to the peculiarities of the fairy world as well as to bonding with estranged beings in human society, such as the rebellious Pen, traumatized war veterans or a changeling.

Violet becomes Trista's chief helper in her struggle to avoid being captured and to find the kidnaped Triss. There is a rapport between the two, based on the fact that they have both been designated as female others by their families and society. Through Violet, the parallel between Trista's alienation as a changeling and the experience of regular family girls exceeding established norms is made clear:

I know, you woke up one day and found out that you couldn't be the person you remembered being, the little girl everybody expected you to be. You just weren't her anymore, and there was nothing you could do about it. So your family decided you were a monster and turned on you." Violet sighed, staring out into the darkness. "Believe me, I do understand that. And let me tell you – from one monster to another – that just because somebody tells you you're a monster, it doesn't mean you are. (294)

Feeling like or being compared to a monster is yet another way of describing deviant femininity but, as is evident from the quote, this idea is also challenged. Several of Hardinge's novels describe how affirming that which makes the central character different and even shunned by the community, turns out to be the key to personal or communal salvation. According to Elizabeth Gilbert, accepting the metaphorical inner monster in *The Lie Tree* becomes "an act

⁹⁹ Abate, *Tomboys*, chap. 6.

¹⁰⁰ Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 75 and 168.

¹⁰¹ Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), chap. 6; and Sarah Wintle, "Horses, Bikes and Automobiles: New Woman on the Move," in *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact: Fin de Siècle Feminism*, ed. Angelique Richardson & Chris Willis (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 66–78.

of liberation and empowerment” for the protagonist.¹⁰² The exploration of different female scripts in *Cuckoo Song* brings about a similar reconsideration of the boundaries between proper and improper femininity but also between the human and non-human.

The Beauty of the Beast

Cuckoo Song belongs to a tradition in children’s and young adult literature that employs toys coming to life and other fantastical creatures to examine issues of subjectivity, gender and humanity.¹⁰³ Such fantasy narratives, according to Zoe Jaques, lend themselves to post-human interrogation: “By imagining ‘beings’ as operating beyond bodily or environmental constraint, children’s fiction [...] can offer sophisticated interventions into debates about what it means to be human or non-human and offer ethical imaginings of a ‘post-human’ world.”¹⁰⁴ The stories contain playful explorations of and alternate ways of relating to the more-than-human by blurring or exceeding conventional boundaries. Dolls coming to life operate in “a liminal space between inanimate object and living subject”.¹⁰⁵ While looking like a human, the doll’s existence is grounded in the non-human material of its form. A doll body can be more or less agile and durable than organic flesh, depending on what it is made of. Nor does the puppet grow old and die in the same way as humans. It simply ceases to exist when its corporeal substance is destroyed or its energy source runs out.¹⁰⁶ Children’s stories about toys coming to life have traditionally been used to explore the characteristics of humanity. As Jaques has pointed out, narratives about animated dolls both mimic and parody notions of humanness. They comment “not only on the border between the human and the inhuman but also on those binaries by which humanity is restricted”.¹⁰⁷ Dolls come to life according to gendered, age-specific human scripts and in, for example, Carlo Collodi’s classic *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883), the metamorphosis of the wooden puppet into a real human boy contrasts ideas of amoral, animalistic boyhood with the humanness of the responsible and productive adult male.¹⁰⁸ As this example makes clear, such stories also examines the establishing of boundaries within humanity and processes of dehumanization.

Hardinge’s novel utilizes a range of images to examine the non-human, that at the same time address a fear of otherness. As Miles has observed, Trista is frequently described in terms

¹⁰² Gilbert, “The Lures and Limitations,” 143. The monstrous feminine is a familiar trope in both feminist theory and children’s literary studies, from the seminal Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) to modern interpretations of YA horror stories, e.g. June Pulliam, *Monstrous Bodies: Feminine Power in Young Adult Horror Fiction* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014).

¹⁰³ See e.g. Lois R. Kuznets, *When Toys Come Alive: Narratives of Animation, Metamorphosis and Development* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); and Beverly Lyon Clark & Margaret R. Higonnet, ed., *Girls, Boys, Books, Toys: Gender in Children’s Literature and Culture* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999).

¹⁰⁴ Zoe Jaques, *Children’s Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 5.

¹⁰⁵ Anna Panszczyk, “The ‘Becoming’ of Pinocchio: The Liminal Nature of Collodi’s Boy-Toy,” *Children’s Literature* 44 (2016): 192, Project MUSE.

¹⁰⁶ Kuznets, *When Toys Come Alive*, 24–33; and Jaques, *Children’s Literature*, 209–214.

¹⁰⁷ Jaques, *Children’s Literature*, 214.

¹⁰⁸ Jaques, *Children’s Literature*, 213–219; and Panszczyk, “The ‘Becoming’ of Pinocchio,” 212–216.

of holes and disintegration, which serves as a metaphor for the fragmented modern subject.¹⁰⁹ Her shattered sense of self is embodied in the amalgam material and continuous break-up of her “makeshift body” (317). According to Lois R. Kuznets, a central concern of toy narratives is anxiety about being “real”, defined as being “an independent subject or self rather than an object or submitting to the gaze of more powerfully real and potentially rejecting beings”.¹¹⁰ Being real is here closely associated with a humanist concept of the individual, as an autonomous, unified subject grounded in a common human core.¹¹¹ In *Cuckoo Song*, experiences of fragmentation and hybridity are in a similar vein connected with the non-human and initially regarded as abnormal or monstrous. Supernatural occurrences and non-normative behavior are intertwined. When Trista’s dolls start to talk, they mirror her fears of not belonging and being abnormal, screeching “Who do think you are? This is *my* family” and “You’re not right!” (22) In panic, she breaks the doll and the whole experience makes her feel “like a monster” (24) and murderer. Trista is trying to tell herself that the magical events are not real and by ignoring them everything will return to normal. However, the insight that she is merely an animated doll and not the girl she has believed herself to be, also brings the realization that in the eyes of society, her family and herself “[s]he was the monster” (118). The confrontation with her otherness forms the basis of a new agency and a defiant affirmation of being: “Even if I’m not Triss, I’m still real! I’m still somebody, even if I don’t have a name!” (119) Thereby, the narrative challenges the humanist subject’s prerogative of being real and launches an exploration of the more-than-human.

The animated doll in *Cuckoo Song* is not a toy and in contrast to Pinocchio she is never transformed into a human, but she exists in a similar liminal condition as the lifelike puppet. Trista’s hybrid character consists of a physical frame made from dead plant material that has been animated by Triss’ human memories and emotions. Her non-human origin is revealed when she loses control or parts of herself. Strands of hair turn into leaves, cobwebs come out of her eyes instead of tears and she grows thorns under threat. The semblance of humanity vanishes and the organic fragments that she is made of reassert themselves. Humanness, like gender, is exposed as performative and must be kept under tight reins. As long as Trista primarily identifies with humans, the plant material inside her seems to have an agency of its own, ripping through her and moving the body as if she was possessed:

*Not-Triss rolled on the bench, laughing with the creak and thrash of a forest in a gale.
 She laughed until the windows rattled and the flames of the hearth dipped and quivered.
 Words came from her mouth, but they were not hers, nor could the voice that spoke
 them be mistaken for human.*

*‘Oh, we are the leaves of the Perspell wood
 That grew before old London stood
 Yet never have we seen a sight so strange
 As eggshell stew pots on the range.’ (165)*

¹⁰⁹ Miles, “Cuckoo Song,” 42–43 and 48. Miles suggests that T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” (1925) functions as a central intertext in *Cuckoo Song*. Both works comment on the spiritual hollowness of interwar society and the trauma of the war experience.

¹¹⁰ Kuznets, *When Toys Come Alive*, 2.

¹¹¹ Cf. Robyn McCallum, *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity* (New York: Garland Publishing 1999), 4–7.

This incident takes place when Mr. Grace exposes Trista as a changeling, using a test of cooking food in eggshells familiar from folklore.¹¹² Whereas the test in traditional fairy stories forces the changeling to reveal its true form, it underlines Trista's hybridity in Hardinge's novel. The scene describes how the leaves take over her body and speak of ancient times before Trista existed, thereby playing with traditional binaries such as body and mind, nature, and culture. There seems to be a rift between the material frame and the human consciousness, where her feral side embodies raw emotion, likened to storm, noise and wilderness. When an anguished Trista lashes through the town, she lets out a wail "that was not one a human girl could have produced. In it she heard the splintering lament of wind-felled trees, the steel cacophony of gulls, the whining note at the heart of the storm" (118). Her voice sounds of natural forces, expressing feelings of sadness and rage, while simultaneously codifying these emotions as unfeminine and inhuman.

Fairies have traditionally been related to primordial, amoral nature. In nineteenth-century England, they were considered to be a savage folk bent on mischief and unable to feel compassion. In Silver's words, "they lacked the civilized virtues, behaving like children (the Victorian 'little savages') or like the mob".¹¹³ The Besiders, too, can be malicious and show little care for human suffering. Although at least the Architect and the Shrike are capable of intellectual feats and magnificent craft, the majority seem to be driven by primitive urges. They act like a mob "with hard, childlike and multicolored" (213) eyes when they encircle, pinch and taunt Trista and her sister Pen. Afterwards the fairy children are compared to animals: "Drop a wounded bird into a box of kittens ... and what you see will not be pretty. They are just doing what they do." (224) The Besiders may act cruelly but it is out of instincts rather than vicious intent. Even if they are living in a city, the fairy people are far from civilized according to human norms. Their presence triggers similar instincts in Trista and sets "her blood alight" (296). Her non-human body responds to their kinship.

The realization that she is not human liberates Trista's mental and physical faculties, simultaneously generating a reevaluation of monstrosity. As she becomes aware of her non-human origin, her surroundings take on a new shape: "It was as if she was letting herself see with her true eyes for the first time, no longer trying to convince herself that everything looked normal." (120) Rather than primarily being a subject of fear, the non-human brings an array of possibilities. Trista notices that her physique is stronger and more supple than human limbs, and she learns how to use the thorns to her advantage. When joining in a nightly fairy pursuit, she experiences feelings of comradeship and elation:

Trista gave chase, trusting to instinct, toe and claw. She felt her hair stream with each leap, the wind chilling her clenched teeth. Her heart beat hard but did not seem to matter, like a loose oddment rattling in a forgotten drawer. [...] Occasionally she caught a flash of lichen-colored eyes, or teeth bared in a grin of fellowship. She tasted snowflakes and realized that her mouth was open, that she was laughing. (376)

¹¹² Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 65; and D. L. Ashliman, "Changelings: An Essay," last modified 1997, accessed June 14, 2021, <https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/changeling.html#eggshells>.

¹¹³ Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 150.

Relying on her feral side allows Trista to perform exhilarating feats. The non-human is still associated with physicality, instinct and emotion but it is no longer a threat to her sanity or sense of self. Nor is monstrosity merely the other or opposite of humanity. It is a different state of being, defined by its own terms. The liminal stage between human and non-human becomes an empowering position, that lets Trista see the world from a double perspective: “The thorny part of Trista’s heart gave a skip of malicious satisfaction. She could not help it. But there was another part of her that watched him with sadness and pity. She could not help that either.” (326) Trista is still divided between different impulses, but the two sides co-exist and allow a wider range of emotion. Unlike the fairies in folklore, she is capable of both spiteful anger and compassion.

Cuckoo Song deals with common themes in books for young adults such as growing up, coming to terms with your family and finding your place in the world. Robyn McCallum has argued that the majority of children’s and young adult literature “valorize the capacity to act independently of social restraint and, in doing so, assume humanistic concepts of individual agency”.¹¹⁴ Trista’s final confrontation with the Architect is described as an opportunity to take action on her own and find her authentic self: “*Now there’s nobody to judge me, to tell me about myself. Nobody to impress, nobody to disappoint. Now is the time I found out who I am.*” (372) When no longer being held back by other people’s expectations, a true core can be unraveled. Hardinge’s novel problematizes the notion of a unique and unified self through the changeling motif, but at the same time maintains the importance of self-discovery as if there is a true self that can be known. The climatic end scene hinges on Trista having something that is solely her own to stop the disintegration of her body:

But what did she have that was hers? Her hair was leaves, her body fragments of another’s life. Everything she had was borrowed [...]. She was litter and leavings, not a person in her own right.

“But I am a person!” she wailed, the room throwing back derisive echoes. “I’m real! I am! I have a name!” (393)

Once more she asserts her personhood, and her sense of self is tied to having a name of her own. This self, however, can hardly be said to be unified or even entirely human. The name forms the center, loosely holding together a being of fragments, leaves and loans. In a parallel to Pinocchio, Trista does become a real girl, but she broadens the notions of girlhood, humanity and possibly even realness in the process.

A Post-Human Ethic

The reassessment of gender and humanity in *Cuckoo Song* simultaneously involves a reconsideration of a dichotomous world view, often encoded into the battle between good and evil in the fantasy genre. According to Margery Hourihan, the narrative pattern of traditional fantasy and adventure stories serves a conservative agenda by naturalizing patriarchal and imperialistic power formations. These narratives underscore the supremacy of the male, white, autonomous, and rational hero, while at the same time supporting a dualistic understanding of

¹¹⁴ McCallum, *Ideologies of Identity*, 257.

the world with clear boundaries between men and women, human and animals, and good and evil.¹¹⁵ Many modern fantasy novels work both within and against the traditional hero story, altering the conventional hero markers as well as the narrative arc.¹¹⁶ In *Cuckoo Song*, Trista's hybridity lets her shift between a human and non-human outlook on the world. Her dual position conveys a more complex moral understanding and the realization "that good men sometimes did terrible things" (170). The main conflict in the novel is not between good and evil, or human and non-human. It is between people who divide the world into sharp opposites and those who tolerate more fluid boundaries.

The changeling juxtaposes the non-human with humans that have been represented as the other in Western society, like women, children, and foreign people. Thereby, the narrative sheds light on practices of othering, and the gendered, racialized and age-specific norms underlying human life. The main adversary of the fairies is the rational Mr Grace, who has many of the hero's characteristics described by Hourihan.¹¹⁷ Whereas the Besiders are "in-between folk" (228), Mr. Grace cannot grasp the physical hybridity or varying moral of the fairy people. He is a tailor and scissors, the tools of his trade, represent his dualistic mindset: "scissors are really intended for one job alone – snipping things in two. Dividing by force. Everything on one side or the other, nothing in between." (218) His world view reflects the patriarchal and anthropocentric values that Hourihan found in many conventional fantasy and adventure tales. To Mr. Grace, there is a clear-cut division between good and bad creatures. While many of the other characters develop an ability to see the world from more than one side, he is set in his view of changelings and fairies as callous monsters. Mr. Grace dehumanizes Trista, calls her "it" and claims that "it doesn't feel pain the way we do; it doesn't feel fear. However much it screams, none of it is real" (170). Trista's panic when he tries to throw her on a fire strongly contradicts his claim. To Mr. Grace, Trista and the Besiders represent absolute otherness and they need to be annihilated for the greater good of society. When faced with his disdain, Trista once more becomes "the miserable child-monster" (381) and she cannot be anything else in his eyes. Her dealings with the Besiders, in contrast, are based on a feeling of recognition. They share the experience of being treated like monsters. Although Trista still finds the Besiders "terrifying", she acknowledges the possibility that "some of them were harmless, or helpless, or stupid, or just too young to realize what they were doing" (224). She no longer sees them as an indefinable evil mob but as a group of individuals, capable of both good and bad.

Through the resolution of the struggle, the narrative formulates a post-human ethic underlining all creatures' equal right to life, based on a shared capacity for suffering and fear of extinction. The conclusion of *Cuckoo Song* sees humans and fairies enter a reluctant truce,

¹¹⁵ Margery Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), 15–38.

¹¹⁶ See e.g. Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero*, chap. 5; Leah Phillips, "Mythopoeic YA: Worlds of Possibility," in *Beyond the Blockbusters: Themes and Trends in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction*, ed. Rebekah Fitzsimmons & Casey Alane Wilson (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), ProQuest Ebook Central; and Caitlin Herington, "'You Wish to Have the Curse Reversed?' Traditional Narrative Motifs of Gender Reconfigured in Bujold's *Chalion* Novels," in *Biology and Manners: Essays on the Worlds and Works of Lois McMaster Bujold*, ed. Regina Yung Lee & Una McCormack (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 55–70.

¹¹⁷ Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero*, 58–106. Miles, "Cuckoo Songs," 45–46, compares Mr Grace to a traditional monster hunter, in particular to Van Helsing in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

enabling the survival of both groups. This does not involve an assimilation of the other or the elimination of difference. Although the novel is set in interwar Britain, it can also be seen as a comment on the ongoing migrant crisis in Europe, which began the same year as the novel was published. The Besiders arrive in Trista's town by boat and live in "a refugee camp" (222). Reading the Besiders as a direct metaphor for contemporary refugees, of course, is not unproblematic, considering the fairies' non-human and supernatural characteristics. Such an interpretation runs the risk of confirming stereotypes of foreign people as irredeemably alien or less civilized. When discussing the relation between fantasy literature and real-life events it is, as Anna Jackson has stressed, important to consider "the limits of allegory".¹¹⁸ A fantasy creature will at least partly follow the logic of the literary tradition and, in the case of Hardinge's novel, a fairy will still primarily be a fairy. At the same time, the depiction of the Besiders as refugees raises more general questions of the human capacity to live with or tolerate difference, and the need to acknowledge the others' right to be. Even if the Besiders disappear from view, they remain in a secret space in the newly constructed railway station in the city, as if to emphasize the strangeness, instability and movement at the center of human life.

In the final confrontation with the Architect, Trista shows what she is made of. By pretending to be a meek, frightened girl she tricks her adversary into letting down his guard, while her supple and briary body allows her to escape his assault. It is her experiences of both worlds and her ability to utilize this double knowledge that brings about the feat. Only by going beyond binaries and adding some thorns to the sweet recipe of girlhood can a happy ending be reached. In a parallel to the Besiders, though, Trista is not fully integrated into the society that has previously shunned her. She and Violet are still outsiders, but their vagrant lifestyle is now a choice affirming the inevitability of change:

"We're like ghosts," she said aloud, feeling sad. "The real world goes on – jobs and families and newspaper stories – and we're outside it."

"No, we're not," said Violet, with surly defiance. "They're the ghosts. [...] Trying to cling to the past, to the way things were, pretending nothing has changed. Everything changes and breaks and stops fitting [...]." (408–9)

The patchwork changeling and the new woman will keep haunting everyday existence on their motorcycle, blurring borders and challenging stasis. And that, in the final words of the novel, is wonderful.

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¹¹⁸ Jackson, "New Directions," 8.

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