Abstract

Team StarKid, a musical theatre company originating at the University of Michigan, has produced a number of works for the past five years, seven of which are stage musicals. These musicals, while made with good intentions and as a way to entertain, still possess a glaring problem when it comes to their female characters. In this essay these problems are exposed and discussed, with support from feminist literary criticism. The first problem to be examined is the way women are portrayed as men’s possessions in some form or another, instead of being allowed to be their own persons. Various examples are used, with two characters, Ginny Weasley and Hermione Granger—adapted from J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books—being the main focus. Secondly a prominent problem, female stereotypes, is discussed. An emphasis is put on how the male writers are only able to write women as two extreme opposites, the pure virgin and the sexual whore, and the vanity that is associated with women and how they are only accepted for their appearance. The third argument is more on a positive note, as it deals with the two major female characters that have been written in positions of power, one who is a villain and the other who is a major character. This portion also criticises the ways in which these women are written and how their positions are perceived within the narrative. Lastly there is a discussion on how traditionally feminine traits are written in two male characters, both of which only succumb to these traits after losing their genitalia, the implication being that it is not possible be masculine without a penis. The overall argument in this essay is that although the StarKid writers mean well, they nevertheless need to work on their female characters in order for them to be more believable.
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Introduction

StarKid Productions, or Team StarKid, is a musical theatre company founded in 2009 at the University of Michigan. Their main goal is to make humorous, mostly parody-based works that are accessible worldwide, and use social media as a means to publish them (“About”). There have been numerous productions to date, including seven musicals, one original web series, concert tours, and sketch comedy shows, most of which can be viewed online. This essay will focus only on the musicals, as those are the productions for which the group is mostly known, with an emphasis on their writing and portrayal of female characters and criticism thereof.

The first musical StarKid produced, *A Very Potter Musical (AVPM)*, premiered in 2009 and is a parody of several key elements within J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books. It focuses mainly on the plot of the fourth and seventh books in that series, with various elements altered both for the sake of comedy and time. Also in 2009, the group put together an original piece, *Me and My Dick (MAMD)*, which chronicles a few days in the life of a teenage boy, his anthropomorphic penis, and their pursuit to lose their virginity. Although the musical relies heavily on sexual themes, particularly due to its world of personified genitalia, it is mainly a love story. Since then, StarKid have produced at least one musical each year. The following year, the team returned to their roots with *A Very Potter Sequel (AVPS)*, which tells the story of the school year that takes place before the events of *AVPM*. This musical parodies Rowling’s universe as well, combining elements from her first, third and fifth books.

In 2011, they wrote *Starship*, a science fiction piece that parodies Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid*, in that an alien longs to become a human. Their 2012 musical, *Holy Musical B@man!*, is their take on the DC hero Batman, written and produced in a similar fashion to the television series from the 1960s starring Adam West. This is the only musical of the existing seven that will not be discussed here. The team’s *Harry Potter* trilogy was
completed in late summer 2012 with a single performance of *A Very Potter Senior Year* (AVPSY), wherein they parted with that particular series with themes of letting go and moving on, and clear allusions to real life situations. Their most recent production to date, *Twisted: The Untold Story of a Royal Vizier (Twisted)*, premiered in 2013, and is the team’s take on the 1992 animated Disney film *Aladdin* done in the style of the Broadway production *Wicked*.

All seven musicals have generally been well received by fans and casual viewers alike, a few of the team’s soundtracks even making it to popular music charts—the *MAMD* soundtrack to the Billboard charts, and the *Starship* soundtrack to the iTunes charts (“About”). The musicals’ central themes are generally humour, close bonds between characters, as well as love, whether it is platonic or romantic. The stories are tightly written and flow well, and most of the characters, be they original or based on already published works, are easily recognisable and identifiable. Despite these qualities, there are a few issues that tend to occur with the way the musicals are written, particularly in terms of their female characters and representation of women and femininity in general. That is not to say that these characters are not relatable or identifiable. The problem arises when there is more focus on the male characters than the female ones, and the latter are generally only supporting characters or a part of the background ensemble. In order to expose some of these problems, feminist criticism will be applied to some key aspects of the musicals, both in terms of themes and certain characterisations. As such, while there have been some improvements in the more recent years, the writers of StarKid still have problems with writing their female characters as actual people rather than stereotypical stock characters.
Chapter 1: Women as Men’s Possessions

The first issue the viewer would notice when watching these musicals is the way in which the female characters are portrayed as the property of men. This chapter will focus primarily on this aspect. First a discussion on the most severe offender along with some other examples, and then the focus will shift to only one character and her derailment as time goes on and the universe expands.

1.1 My Sister, My Girlfriend, My Crush

A theme within the musicals, especially in the Potter ones, that is unfortunately noticeably reoccurring is the fact that the female characters very rarely get to introduce themselves, but are rather referenced in correlation to a man. While this is not true of the very first female character introduced, Hermione in A Very Potter Musical, the same cannot be said about the second one, Ginny. She does get to speak before she is introduced, which is not true for many other female characters, though as soon as it needs to be established who she is, she is referred to as “[Ron’s] stupid little dumb sister” rather than saying something about her own person (Act 1 Part 2). In the very same scene, during the introduction of another character, Ginny is said to be irritating, and as such, her brother’s private irritation, again labelling her as his property. The phrases “Ron’s sister” and “my sister” are used in some form or another repeatedly throughout the course of AVPM, eventually peaking in a scene in which Ginny and the main character Harry share a kiss, which Harry breaks upon remembering that she is his best friend’s little sister. The only reason Harry does not want to continue seems to be because he sees Ginny as not a person, but Ron’s possession, for which he needs permission to take and use (Act 1 Part 12). Similarly, at the very end of the musical, where the two share another kiss, Ron intervenes as though Harry is taking something from him without his consent.
Ginny and Harry apparently both have to wait for his approval in order to be allowed to continue, which they do get (Act 2 Part 9).

Ginny gets this treatment again in *A Very Potter Senior Year*, in which she is constantly referred to as Harry Potter’s girlfriend, even by her own mother (Act 1 Part 2). In the musical, her relationship with Harry is broken up, to which she responds by saying that she and her body need him, implying that she cannot stand having to live without him (Act 1 Part 3). This dependency of hers is so strong that she later proclaims that since she is not Harry’s girlfriend anymore, she may as well not be alive (Act 1 Part 4). Additionally, during the climax of *AVPSY*, the villain, Lord Voldemort, tells Harry that he has been possessing Ginny throughout the school year, thanking Harry for giving her to him and stating that “she is [his] now”, implying that she is simply some sort of object that can be passed around and owned (Act 2 Part 6). This use of the word “possessing”—meaning taking control of one’s mind in this context—is very telling of Ginny’s position as a character, and can be taken quite literally. What is especially jarring about all of this is that in the same musical, Dean Thomas, while in an argument with Harry about Ginny, states: “Ginny is not your property!” (Act 1 Part 7). This is immensely contradicting, as this is all the viewer has come to know of Ginny’s purpose as a character so far. She has no significant traits of her own outside of having feelings for Harry, or being owned by someone, whether it is her brother, her boyfriend, or even the villain, all of whom are men.

There are other characters that fall victim to being spoken of primarily as men’s possessions, though not as severely as Ginny. Other characters from the Potter musicals include Cho Chang, who is introduced only as the girl Harry has had a crush on (*AVPM* Act 1 Part 2), and Lily Potter, who at one point is referred to only as a man’s woman: “Hey! Now you can talk to me however you like, but when you talk to my woman that way, that’s when we’re going to have words” (*AVPSY* Act 2 Part 5).
A non-Potter example could be Sally, the main female character from *Me and My Dick*, who is first introduced as Joey’s “ugly-face neighbour” (Act 1 Part 1), a phrase that could easily have been substituted with “the girl next door” in order not to have to speak of her in relation to a man.

The opposite situation, where female characters talk about men as their possessions, does happen occasionally. However, this only happens twice in all seven musicals, with said characters, Ginny and Professor Umbridge, only using the phrase “my boyfriend” to refer to their respective love interests, Harry and Dumbledore. Both male characters have their distinct traits beyond being these women’s boyfriends, however, and their existence and purpose is never reduced to being only their possessions.

1.2 From Being Super Smart to Being Shared

It is not only Ginny that has gotten an unfair treatment within the StarKid musicals. While she is the most notable example, there is another female character who has been handled progressively worse as the Potter musicals have gone on. This is the character of Hermione Granger, the very first female character introduced within the StarKid canon. Unlike Ginny, she gets to introduce herself, stating—in song—that although she may not be especially attractive, she is very intelligent, which makes up for it in her opinion:

> I may be frumpy but I’m super smart
> Check out my grades, they’re A’s for a start
> What I lack in looks, well, I make up in heart
> And well guys, yeah that’s totally awesome. (Act 1 Part 1)

This could be considered very positive, as it is rare to see a female character who values her intelligence rather than her appearance, and does not see a problem with it. However, this is sadly not the case with Hermione. Although she does showcase her wisdom countless times in
A Very Potter Musical, rather than being rewarded for it, she is punished and ridiculed for it. While trying to speak up about the dangers of specific tasks, she gets scolded for interrupting (Act 1 Part 3); when saying that Harry cannot compete in said tasks because he needs to study—which is a lie—the response is a mocking “nobody studies at Hogwarts except for you” (Act 1 Part 4); and her notes on this task she does for Harry are ignored because he deems them as boring (Act 1 Part 9). Despite this, she does continue to prove her intelligence throughout the Potter series, and is at least acknowledged as being clever and smart by other characters from time to time.

However, being smart is not Hermione’s only trait. While she does proclaim that her intelligence makes up for her being unattractive, there are constant mentions of her being unhappy with how she looks, as if it is her primary goal to be beautiful. In a sense, this is true. In a scene in AVPM, she declares that she would use an invisibility cloak to “avoid ever having to face [her] reflection in the mirror” (Act 1 Part 6). While this could be considered a throwaway joke at her expense, as there are others of a similar nature, this kind of thinking does come into play in A Very Potter Sequel, where it is revealed that her deepest desire is to look like Cho Chang, who is always primarily referred to as beautiful (Act 1 Part 15). It should be noted that this desire of Hermione’s is not present in the source material by Rowling. This in turn marks Hermione’s first major step backwards, as instead of having intellectual desires as one would expect given her character, she focuses on her appearance. Even in A Very Potter Senior Year, where the team was forced to switched actresses, this is used again. Hermione is hit in the face, resulting in her nose breaking. As a result of this, the script version of AVPSY reveals, Ron states that she looks far better than before, prompting Hermione at first to begin doubting her “credibility as an intellectual,” though upon hearing what Ron has to say on her looks, those worries are immediately discarded (Act 1 Part 1).
Hermione’s biggest downfall, however, is her descent from an independent, smart character, to being a prize to be won. This happens twice in two musicals, and in both instances this occurs due to a feud between Ron and Draco, the two boys who wish to date her. The first instance is in *A Very Potter Sequel*, where a time travelling Draco tells Ron that he does not get her in the future, as though she is simply a thing to be obtained (Act 2 Part 6). The second, and worse instance occurs in *A Very Potter Senior Year*, in which Hermione is petrified—turned to stone, essentially—and thus literally becomes an object for Ron and Draco to compete for, which they do. The two of them agree to seek help, the terms being that if they are successful, they both get to date her, to which Ron proclaims that: “sharing Hermione is better than burying Hermione” (Act 2 Part 4). However, Hermione herself is frozen at the time this is being discussed, and never consents to this. In a sense, the two are putting her on a pedestal and competing for her without her even knowing about it. She has been turned into a statue, a work of art that needs to be spoken for. According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, this kind of treatment takes away a woman’s autonomy (14) which is precisely what happens here. All of these factors jarringly come together at the end of the musical, where Hermione eventually finds out about the boys’ deal. Instead of being offended by it and saying that they should have asked her first, as she perhaps would have in the first musical, she is completely unmoved by it, evidently excited by being two boys’ object of affection (Act 2 Part 6). In a span of three musicals, Hermione’s character has gone from being the smartest witch of her age, to only caring about her appearance, to approving of being shared by two boys as if she were an object. While she is not a bad character by any means, it is nonetheless sad to see her deteriorate so much.
Chapter 2: Female Stereotypes in the Musicals

More issues are apparent regarding the portrayal of women in the StarKid musicals than only belonging to men. There is also the fact that there seems to be no real character for many of them, and some fall victim to obvious stereotypes, reducing them to only a few minor predefined characteristics. This chapter will showcase and discuss a couple of these stereotypes, and also expand on the emphasis on appearance mentioned in the previous chapter.

2.1 The Virgin and the Whore

One of the more curious aspects of male writing is their depiction of female sexuality. While a male writer can see himself in his male characters and portray the sexual aspect there with no problem (Cixous 877), it is as though female characters can only be either two things: extremely sexual beings who are always making sexual references or advances, or completely inexperienced in the area and are thus innocent and vulnerable. While not an exact replica, this does tie in with Gilbert and Gubar’s “angel and monster” theory when it comes to male authors writing female characters, in that the women are recognised only as certain archetypes that male writers have invented in order to make it easier to write them (17). This is very true for almost all of the StarKid musicals, as there is almost always at least one character of either of those types in each musical. While this can be an interesting dynamic if done right, in these cases the characters are mostly reduced to only the characteristics typically associated with either stereotype.

The Potter musicals alone have two characters that fit the sexually active stereotype, and both of them are typically only presented as thus. Cho Chang’s overall appearance relies on sex appeal any time she is present onstage, as her costume choices consist of skirts shorter than the other girls’, as well as high heels rather than the flat bottoms the others wear.
Likewise, she is always presented as the most desirable girl in school, with multiple characters stating that she is beautiful, and at one point in *A Very Potter Musical*, Harry blatantly says that he wants to have sex with her (Act 1 Part 6). Some of her dialogue also consists of various forms of either innuendos or sexual references, even one instance in *A Very Potter Sequel* where she implies she has no problem with having a potential affair with her teacher (Act 2 Part 1). This labels her as a sex symbol, something to either aspire to be, or to aspire to get, in terms of male fantasies, which is not her role in Rowling’s books at all.

The other character from the Potter musicals to fit this stereotype is Bellatrix Lestrange, whose entire purpose in the musicals seems to be to serve as a sexual being and nothing else. While Cho Chang is not strictly a bad person, Bellatrix is, and since she is an antagonist, her sexual nature becomes a part of this particular characterization. According to Bates et al., it is this sexual desire that is needed in order to label a woman as bad, as opposed to the pure virginal type (33). As such, Bellatrix is threatening and intimidating because of her active sexuality. Before Bellatrix is seen in *A Very Potter Musical*, her name is brought up in the context that Voldemort has had multiple sexual partners in the past, implying that she is not only one of them but may also be a frequent one (Act 1 Part 7). While nothing further is ever said of Voldemort’s sexual exploits, Bellatrix’ entire character revolves around hers with him. As such, there is little that can be said about her that does not have something to do with sex. Even her dialogue implies that it is among things she associates with herself, with her telling Voldemort at one point that “it’s going to be like the old days when [they] would do nothing but torture, murder, and make love” (Act 1 Part 14). Even her introduction as a child in a flashback in *A Very Potter Senior Year* has sexual undertones, with her being shoved into the ground, and her only response being an intrigued gasp, heavily implying that she is aroused by this act (Act 1 Part 4).
However, the virgin and whore stereotypes are nowhere as prominent as they are in *Me and My Dick*. With the musical taking place in a universe where genitalia—and by extension, libido—are personified, it should be expected that some female characters are experienced with sex and some are not. This is true, though it is only done in stereotypical extremes. The virgin end of the spectrum has Sally and her anthropomorphic vagina, Miss Cooter. Sally herself does not fit the pure virgin stereotype, as she does not possess the conventional beauty that such a character needs in order to be connected with this stereotype. Miss Cooter, however, does, and over the course of the musical, she is the only vagina that is explicitly stated as being inexperienced in any sexual acts, and thus she is labelled as pure and untouched. In addition, she is also the only vagina character seen onstage who seems genuinely interested in said sexual acts, and is promptly called naïve for it (Act 1 Part 6), as though this is something a female character should not think. Finally, she is the only vagina character to be called beautiful, which carries the implication that a vagina cannot be beautiful unless it is untouched and virginal.

With this in mind, there is then the opposite side of the spectrum, which is occupied by the character of Tiffany and her vagina, The Old Snatch, and to some extent, Vanessa and her vagina, Flopsy. Already it becomes clear that the vaginas’ names have something to do with their state as sexual beings, and that it is done in a purely negative manner. “Flopsy” implies being loose and slack, as though from prolonged penetration or other such acts, while “Snatch” is a derogatory term for a woman—or vagina in this case—who has had many sexual partners (“Snatch”). Neither name is flattering, but they are nonetheless the names given to the established two vaginas that have had the most sex. This is not the case with the penises, as their names are either generic, as in Joey’s case, Dick, or have something to do with their size, i.e. Big Tallywacker and Weenie. The vaginas, however, seem to be trapped in the state of eternal foulness and general unwholesomeness, which is determined by how much
sex they have had, The Old Snatch especially. In addition, in order to demonstrate how Flopsy and The old Snatch are less desirable than the virginal Miss Cooter, the former are both played by men, giving the impression that they are unclean or vile in some way. The overall idea seems to be that as long as a woman is pure and virginal, she is much more beautiful and presented as untainted, whereas the opposite means ending in bitterness and filth. These stereotypes set a bad example for women, and especially those who could be considered promiscuous: in the musical, a woman being sexually active with more than one partner is presented either as shameful or as her defining characteristic. The fact that these stereotypes are never rectified also says a lot about the male writers themselves, and their apparent inability to write female sexuality as anything other than stereotypical extremes, with one being good and the other being repulsive.

2.2 *Looks Are More Important Than Anything*

The focus on appearance in a visual medium such as a stage musical should not come off as a surprise, as there are certain standards one must apparently adhere to in order to get by in such media. That is not to say that being considered beautiful is a problem. It becomes another case when one of the more important aspects of either a narrative or a character is whether or not someone looks good. While not strictly a stereotype in and of itself, this idea of focusing on appearance becomes an issue when it is the central message the story conveys. The StarKid musicals have numerous instances of this, and almost only when discussing women. The main idea is that if a woman is not beautiful, she is not sought after and thus does not deserve any attention, in most cases from a man. Moreover, a beautiful woman must only be described as such, and never be referenced in relation to her personality, wit, or other such values.

The first instance of this is, as mentioned, Hermione from the Potter musicals. Although she is aware of her own intellect, she nonetheless views it as compensation for her
lack of good looks, as stated in her introductory verse. However, while the first act of the musical makes multiple jabs at her appearance, most often made by Ron, Draco continuously talks about how beautiful she is. Although presented as a childish crush, this does raise the question of whether or not Draco perceives Hermione as being anything other than beautiful. He never mentions her intellect, efficiency, or other such traits, but rather only focuses on how she appears. This never changes throughout the three musicals, and there is never any elaboration on why he wants to date her, other than finding her attractive. In only the context of *A Very Potter Musical*, this does eventually culminate in Hermione’s makeover for the Yule Ball, where she is presented as the most beautiful girl in the room. This is essentially what gets Ron’s attention, who has spent the majority of the musical up to that point talking about how unattractive she is. Thus, it could be argued that her comment about looks being “more important than anything” (Act 1 Part 12) is what the writers are intentionally saying matters the most for women, despite the satirical nature of the quote.

Once again there is the case of Sally when it comes to *Me and My Dick*. As has been mentioned, the very first word to be associated with her is “ugly-face” (Act 1 Part 1), implying not only that she is unattractive, but also that this is all that matters when discussing her. In the musical, Joey and Dick both constantly refer to her as a salad, which to them is something disgusting. This is never thoroughly expanded upon, and it is not clear as to whether or not the two are only referring to her appearance or to her personality as well. The former is more likely when the overall context of the musical is considered, however, specifically in the way Joey views his crush, Vanessa, or as he dubs her: “the hot little Jewish girl” (Act 1 Part 1). Joey knows little to nothing about Vanessa outside of her being aesthetically pleasing to him, so the viewer could assume that he only sees her for her looks and nothing else. This becomes evident when, after falling for Miss Cooter, Dick is unable to get erect when with Flopsy, which is what Joey wants him to do. Joey’s reason for not
wanting to do what Dick wishes is simple: “Sally is a gross-ass salad, and Vanessa is the hottest bitch I’ve ever seen” (Act 1 Part 8). With this single line, Joey sums up how he views the women in his life. Their worth, be it sexual or not, comes from their appearances. Even by the end when he does realise that Sally is the one for him, he still comments on her looks, stating that she is not as unattractive as he initially thought she was. For Joey Richter, as a shallow teenage boy, appearance is everything, and any woman who is unappealing to him is not worth his time.

It is sadly not only the earlier musicals that have this problem. Another example would be a short interaction between two characters in Starship on their female colleagues. Although one of said colleagues is a robot, the dialogue between the two males makes it clear that they are only interested in the characters’ physical aspects. This becomes obvious when one of the male characters exclaims in awe “she’s smart too?” (Act 1 Part 7, my emphasis), as if that is only an additional bonus to the otherwise beautiful robot.

The last example of this, while not as obvious as the other ones, is from the team’s most recent musical to date, Twisted. In it, the princess’ appearance becomes something of a goal for the antagonist of the show, Aladdin. While she, like her Disney counterpart in the film Aladdin, sees him as a charming prince, he views her only as a sexual object, going so far as to state that he has no interest in her feelings, but only wants to have sex with her (Act 2 Part 2). This is a reoccurring theme throughout the musical, and although it could be considered a way to portray the character of Aladdin as despicable, it nonetheless shows that the writers are still unable to write a female character that is not at some point reduced to only her looks.
Chapter 3: Women in Positions of Power

It should be noted that in seven musicals, all of which span for over two hours of running time, a woman is in a powerful position only four times. To give this context: for example, in *A Very Potter Musical* alone, the two professors present onstage and the headmaster are all male, whereas in Rowling’s books there are quite a few female professors as well as male; in *Starship*, the head of the corporation in the musical is male. The overall presence of a powerful male is much more prominent than that of a female, and in two of the four instances where a woman is powerful, she is downplayed, and in three of those four, the woman is played by a male actor. Despite this, the StarKid team has managed to write two very powerful women, both of which are memorable and leave their effect both within the musical and on the viewer. This chapter will focus on those two characters: Professor Dolores Umbridge from *A Very Potter Sequel* and the princess from *Twisted*.

3.1 As the Villain

One of the key factors that needs to be established is that, being a parody of an existing franchise, the Potter musicals do not use original characters, but work with already created ones, with the team’s own alternate interpretations. This is the case of their Umbridge, who in Rowling’s original story is a power hungry woman who does everything she can to make the students’ lives miserable in ways that she deems acceptable. StarKid’s interpretation does this as well, though not in exactly the same ways.

In simple terms, Umbridge is not presented as strictly cold-hearted, but rather as a mother figure gone wrong. She could be considered a deconstruction of this trope, as although she does continuously refer to herself as “mama” and views the students as her children, she does not possess any of the typical traits associated with the mother figure; she is not kind or caring, nor is she supportive or helpful. She abuses the kids, both mentally and physically, and
is so close-minded that she does not even consider it as such. Interestingly, while these traits could all be present for the sole reason that the viewer is meant to dislike her and for the writers to make their own interpretation of an already existing and hated character, StarKid’s Umbridge is given a backstory that explains her actions. In a scene that very much resembles a psychotic breakdown, it is revealed that Umbridge herself suffered the same treatment she is inflicting on the kids, from her mother. This is evidently where the term “mama” comes from, as well as most of her methods. The backstory is extremely Freudian, in the sense that it makes it clear that Umbridge’s mother was abusive to her in much the same way that she is to the children, giving the impression that this is all she knows and thus she sees no wrong in it (Act 2 Part 3).

Despite her backstory revealing how she thinks and views the world, Umbridge is nonetheless the victim of a one-sided narrative. The musical is told from the point of view of the students, and thus Umbridge’s actions are seen as tyrannical and she herself a person that needs to be stopped. An argument could be made that because she is the villain, this needs to be done in order for the viewer to sympathise with the protagonists, though with the added backstory, it becomes more difficult to see her as the sociopath the narrative tries to make her appear as. Her biggest crimes are taking over positions in the school previously occupied by men, and being responsible for the subsequent events where things get progressively worse for the protagonists the more powerful she gets: one character remarks on “the horrible things that are going on here since Umbridge was named headmaster,” with another proclaiming that the school has become a prison (Act 2 Part 1). While those statements are true given the context, they, along with the overall storyline in the second act, nonetheless hold a deeper meaning. Umbridge is the first woman StarKid has written that is in a position of power, and although she is the villain, A Very Potter Sequel makes it seem as though a woman cannot be in charge without things going awry. The fact that the positions Umbridge takes were
occupied by men makes this even more obvious, as the school was in a better condition before she came along. Essentially, the narrative tells the viewer to dislike Umbridge because she takes these positions, and as a result they are meant to want the men back because she does her job so poorly.

This becomes problematic when it is taken into account how Umbridge views the world. She is aware of the fact that a woman needs to be assertive and strong—both physically and mentally—in order to get by in a male-dominated society, claiming that “it’s a man’s world out there, and to get ahead, you’ve got to be stronger than a man. You’ve got to be a woman!” (Act 1 Part 6). This could have been presented as a positive point, as this is true of real life situations. Nevertheless, Umbridge’s assertiveness is written as a bad feature, because she uses it to gain power over others. It makes her intimidating. Had she been a sociopath, or had the viewer been unaware of her past, this would not have been as problematic as it is. It would have the same implications of a powerful woman making a place worse, but without the reasoning behind her decisions. As it is, however, the viewer does know that her mind has been warped into thinking that her actions and decisions are the right ones, and so it makes it more difficult to ignore the way the narrative paints her as the quintessential female dictator. Moreover, StarKid presents its audience with a dilemma of sorts. With all her flaws and factors, Umbridge is a well thought out and rounded character, but she is not played by a woman. It raises the question of why such a “strong” character must be played by a male actor.

StarKid’s Umbridge is by no means a bad character, and is actually one of their few early female characters that is both memorable and interesting. She is given a decent backstory that explains her actions, and while those actions are bad, she is nonetheless presented as resilient and persistent, creating a villain that is both menacing and curious to observe.
3.2 As the Deuteragonist of a story

*Twisted*, like all the other StarKid musicals, is predominantly male-centred. The protagonist, Ja’far, is male, the antagonists are male, the highest power is a man, etc. In the midst of all these men is the deuteragonist, the princess, a nameless character—the anonymity is possibly done due to copyright reasons—who is arguably one of, if not the best written female characters StarKid has created. The first positive aspect of notice is the fact that she is a woman in a powerful position that is actually played by a woman, with her three predecessors having all been played by men for humorous effect. The second is the fact that although a male romantic interest does come into play at one point, the musical does not conform to the clichéd happy ending with her marrying said romantic interest. Third, and most importantly, while she is only a princess throughout the musical, the final scenes see her becoming the sultan of her kingdom.

The princess is first and foremost a parody of the animated Disney heroines of the 1990s, as she dreams of freedom and to get away from her, as she puts it, stifling life. In addition, although she does not wish to do so, she does recognise the fact that, being the princess, she is authoritative, and can thus command people. Furthermore, she is rather young—the musical states that she is sixteen—and is played as such, being somewhat indecisive and naïve, stating herself that she wants “to make [her] own choices […] but decisions are hard” (Act 1 Part 2). This is problematic in a sense, as it implies that a woman is unable to make sensible choices for whatever reason, though when it is revealed how young the princess is, it becomes less so. Moreover, it is established in the musical that the men are not particularly good at decision-making either, making it clear that this is not limited solely to the princess.

What is also interesting to note about the princess is that by creating her, it appears that the StarKid writers are attempting to prove that they are becoming more aware of their
problems concerning their female characters, particularly in regards to the concept of marriage. In her first scene the princess expresses no will to get married, as she believes it to be “a medieval construct that represents the ownership of women” (Act 1 Part 2). With this line, it seems as though the writers are heading in the right direction with their female characters, but because it is so stereotypically feminist, it is difficult to say if the intention is to be serious or not. Although the princess does believe later on that marrying her romantic interest, Aladdin, will aid her in both remedying her kingdom’s socioeconomic state as well as protect it from an attacking force, it should be stated that nothing comes of said marriage, and it is only mentioned once. The princess quickly abandons this idea, but the fact that she considers it for a moment makes her character seem inconsistent, especially since in an earlier scene, she is seen having a few thoughts on how to save the kingdom herself. Granted, they are very naïve, but the fact that she has them makes a difference. One example is her idea of how to solve the socioeconomic crisis in the kingdom, which consists of making every subject a princess, her reasoning behind it being that “because I’m the princess, everyone has to be nice to me and give me things” (Act 2 Part 2). An argument could be made that because she is a teenager her opinions on various things change on a day to day basis, but it is rather awkward to see her proclaim she does not know how to make decisions in one scene, and then show she has made some in another. Regardless of this, as mentioned, by the end of the musical she does actually become the sultan, and her seemingly ridiculous idea of making everybody a princess does in fact play a part in resolving the inequality in the kingdom (Act 2 Part 5). In a sense, while the musical has repeatedly attempted to show the viewer, both directly and indirectly, that the princess would not be a good decision maker, the end proves that she does possess the qualities of a great leader. People seem fully ready to follow her, despite the fact that her ideas were initially claimed to be mindless fantasies.
StarKid still has a long way to go when it comes to representing a female character, but the princess could be considered the first step of many in a positive direction. Although it is rather problematic that it has taken them seven musicals to come to this point, it is no less important, and it shows that the writers are in fact trying to do better than what they have done in the past.
Chapter 4: The Literally Castrated Male

It is not only the female characters that suffer from the StarKid team’s writing. The idea of femininity being attributed to their male characters has not been well adapted either. The feminine traits are usually to be mocked or played for laughs, as if it is unacceptable for a man to possess them. For whatever reason, the writers of StarKid have done this twice, and in both instances the application of feminine traits to a male character had to be done via castration. One case is a temporary separation between the character and his penis, and the other involves the complete removal of a character’s testicles. This chapter will focus on these cases and the effects that these losses have on the characters.

4.1 He’s Gone!

The turning point in Me and My Dick is a scene in which Joey and Dick are quite literally separated from each other after a heated argument over which girl they want to sleep with. While a possible metaphor in itself—what the mind wants versus what the body wants—it is also written as a means to change Joey’s character for a while. During the first act, it is established that he is a very typical, hormone-charged teenage boy, who has the sexual urges any boy his age would have. There is not much else to it than that, as he rarely if ever expresses any other emotion than lust towards anyone, with the exception of Dick whom he considers his best friend. However, as soon as Dick leaves him, there is a clear change in his character and he suddenly begins showing signs of his more emotional side.

Soon after Dick leaves, Joey’s heart—aptly named Heart—enters the scene, embodying both the physical job of a beating heart and the metaphorical one of love and emotion, much like how Dick represents both the physical penis and the metaphorical libido. In one of his first lines, Heart mentions how he is “a part of [Joey] that maybe [he] forgot about,” which heavily implies that Joey has been neglecting his emotions for a while, relying
instead only on his lust and libido (Act 1 Part 8). The following series of events involving Joey and Heart centre on trying to court Vanessa through romance rather than sex like the previous attempt with Dick. Heart introduces Joey to a number of typical elements generally associated with romance, including chocolate, flowers, and even a ring, with the idea of proposing to the girl. They fail spectacularly, resulting in Vanessa’s friend Tiffany making a jab about his penis, to which Heart responds with telling Joey he should not take it personally seeing as how his penis is gone. This pierces through Joey and he runs off crying (Act 2 Part 2).

The whole idea with this segment seems to be that since Joey has lost his masculine symbol, he becomes more accepting of what could be considered more “feminine” ideas. Heart himself does not emerge until Dick has left, leaving the viewer to believe that these emotions and this acceptance have always been present within Joey, but have not been allowed to surface due to his masculine nature brought on by his connection with his penis. Therefore, once Dick is no longer around, Joey is permitted to embrace his apparently unknown “feminine” side. Other characters become aware of this, notably The Old Snatch and Miss Cooter, who, after interacting with Joey and his more emotional side, both make a similar remark on how he acted as though he did not have a penis (Act 2 Part 4 and Act 2 Part 6). This raises the question of whether a man’s emotions are so clouded by thoughts of having to seem masculine that he cannot show them without fear of seeming less manly. As Mary Beth Pringle and Anne Stericker point out, a man conventionally does not openly show his feelings because of societal expectations, leaving him somewhat emotionally crippled (51). In Joey’s case, it is established early on that he occasionally cries in the school’s choir room, though this is not shown onstage until after Dick leaves and Vanessa rejects his proposal.

It can therefore be assumed that because Dick has left, both Joey and the writers are more open to this display of emotions because Joey has now become less manly, so to say,
and him being more feminine becomes more laughable as a result. Helen Andelin argues that by taking away a man’s symbol of superiority, it consequently diminishes his masculinity (84), and this is precisely what the writers of MAMD do to Joey during the second act of the musical. While Joey’s case is not as severe or stereotypical as it could have been, it is nonetheless clear that the writers want to show the impact the loss of the penis has on a man, and in doing so make it apparent that once a man does not have a penis, he is seen as being weaker as a result.

This all ties in with Freud’s idea of the castration complex, which states that upon realising that a girl does not have a penis, a boy fears that he will lose his own, thus ending his Oedipal phallic phase (Freud 135). A woman’s lack of a penis is presented as exactly that, a lack, and thus she spends her life in a continuous pursuit of it. This is very applicable to Joey’s case in MAMD, as although he is not strictly castrated, he nonetheless loses the phallus he has become so close to, and becomes less masculine as a result. He is lacking something, as noted by the other characters. The fear of castration has become a reality.

It could very well be argued that this particular problematic characterization was no one’s intentions. After all, the members of the team were only in their early twenties when putting the show together, so it is possible that the writers were simply attempting to make fun of either themselves or of male sexuality in general. Nevertheless, the implications are still present, whether that was the objective or not.

4.2 Spayed

When the term “war hero” is used, one image that could come to mind could be that of a slightly aged, physically strong, white male who possibly has scars, either physical or emotional, from previous battles or other traumatic experiences. Such is the core depiction of StarKid’s Commander Up from Starship, a musical that takes place after that particular
universe’s “robot wars” have ended. In a futuristic world, robot slaves rebelled against their masters, and human soldiers fought against them, one of those soldiers being Commander Up. His introduction in the musical is built up immensely, and once the viewer sees him, he seems like the general idea of the war hero. However, with this being StarKid, things do not stay serious for long, and it quickly becomes evident that Commander Up has softened somewhat because of “his famous injury” (Act 1 Part 4). By “softened”, the characters are referring to the fact that Up is no longer the fierce warrior of the past, but has rather become an empty shell of himself, needing constant reassurance of his abilities, mothering his comrades rather than giving them motivational speeches, and cowering in fear at any sight of threat.

Although Commander Up at first appears to be a deconstruction of the typical war hero archetype, he is actually a very curious interpretation of a male character in a typically female position. That is not to say that this has anything to do with his position as a commander or a soldier. What sets Up apart from other characters with similar backgrounds is the nature of his injury and what it has done to him as a person. This injury is only briefly referenced in the first act of the musical, but never elaborated upon during that act, and only used as an excuse as to why Up has gotten “soft”. It is not until the second act that he reveals to Bug, the protagonist, that he lost his testicles in the final battle of the robot wars (Act 2 Part 3). This revelation is all a viewer needs to know in order to understand why Up has been acting strangely and different according to his team, particularly the character Taz, with whom he fought alongside in the war.

Much like with Joey in Me and My Dick, the viewer is presented with a male character who seems to lose his “manliness” through losing his genitals, or a part thereof. While it is implied that the penis is intact, Up’s lack of testicles serves to make him a coward and, to some extent, a mother figure to the group of Starship Rangers. He genuinely cares for the group, and will never resort to violence in any situation if it can be avoided. This is not
necessarily a bad thing, as he is never openly ridiculed, but is scolded for it a few times by Taz, who of course would be more used to seeing him as a more confident man. Although it would be assumed that Up would be embarrassed by this change in personality, he nonetheless fully embraces this new side of himself, and never shies away from saying something well-meaning, or showing protective instincts towards the rest of the group. What makes the situation awkward, however, is the fact that Up needed to lose a centrally masculine part of himself in order to obtain this motherly side.

Up is thus mostly written as something of a feminine man, which leads to the question of what makes a character “feminine”. In her essay on female dependency, Helen Andelin proclaims that in order to become feminine, one must remove any shred of resilience and power, and instead rely on others, preferably a man, to do the job (87). While the latter part is not entirely true for Up—he relies on Taz, a woman, instead—the rest is, as although he is physically strong, he never uses this strength to his advantage in the musical. Likewise, he does not stand up for himself, and it is not until he reveals his story to Bug that he fully comes to terms with the loss of his testicles and wholly embraces his new persona. Again the connection is made between male anatomy, strength and masculinity, and the implication that if said male anatomy is not present on a man, then neither are those qualities within him. The argument in Up’s case seems to be that the traits traditionally associated with masculinity—strength, aggression, etc. (McNay 17)—are not there because a part of his anatomy is missing.

However, unlike with Joey, where Dick comes back and the temporary separation only serves to make Joey more accepting of his own emotions, Up’s physical state does not change. His view on himself, on the other hand, changes for the better. After revealing that he can no longer even think of mindless killing like he did in the past, Up gets told that he needs “to find a way to kill with [his] heart” because he cares too much to do it directly (Act 2 Part 3). In the musical’s climax, he actually finds a way to do this: after getting stung by three
enormous mosquitos, he quickens his heartbeat by doing breathing exercises, causing them to suck too much of his blood and explode. After doing this, Up proudly proclaims that he is still a killer, subsequently getting told by Taz that he is “the proof that you don’t need a tiny skin sack of the testicles to be one tough son of a bitch” (Act 2 Part 8). Moreover, the imagery of the motherly Up being attacked by the phallic mosquito stingers could also serve as a metaphor for his finally accepting his castration. Although this is a good message, it implies that Up needed to be told he could function without his testicles rather than realising it himself. The characters who do tell him are the male protagonist, and Taz, a female character who possesses masculine traits, implying that Up would not have come to terms with his situation were it not for fellow masculine characters. Additionally, the viewer is again faced with the “feminine” male character as lacking something, indicating that because something is not physically there, something has to be emotionally missing as well. Up is not “whole”, and he compensates for it by caring for others, resulting in a rather absurd mother figure that nonetheless embodies positive traits.
Conclusion
The writers of the StarKid musicals have, to date, only been male, and while they have certainly gotten better at it in more recent years, their representation and writing of female characters are nonetheless highly problematic. Not only that, but they also tend to incorporate stereotypes of various sorts onto both their female and male characters. Over the course of five years, and counting, they have written women as possessions and objects to be looked at, as vain sexual beings, and even as self-entitled tyrants. All the while they have had their male characters show the typical phallocentric viewpoint that their penises are the source of their masculinity, and that a man cannot be caring unless he physically loses a part of himself. It could be debated whether or not this was all done deliberately, though it is far more likely that all of these instances were not intentional, and rather only written for the sake of comedy and attempts at different characterisations. Even with all of this, StarKid has still yet to produce a musical where a female is in a lead role. Perhaps with the newer times and after five years of practice, they will come to, and begin writing women as people rather than figures with chosen character traits. Or maybe even allow a woman to enter the writing team.

Despite their flaws, Team StarKid is by no means a terrible theatre company. Their messages of love and devotion, and their sense of unity around the globe are just some of the many things that can be celebrated about them. As with any enjoyable media, for all their good intentions and strong messages, there will always be problems within StarKid’s works whether they intend to or not, and in all honesty, that can be very positive. One cannot have the good without a bit of the bad as well, and that does not necessarily mean that these works are not enjoyable despite their flaws.
Works Cited


